

FRIENDSHIP and *DUTY*

Scotpress



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FRIENDSHIP AND DUTY

McCoy leaned back in his chair and watched the couple on the dance floor. It was getting late, but he didn't regret that he had accepted Jim Kirk's invitation to accompany him and his girl friend to the small bar. It was the last day of the two week shore leave they'd been granted on this small frontier planet. The girl - or rather, the young woman - Kirk was dancing with was one of the passengers they were to pick up and transport to another planet.

McCoy could tell that Kirk was happy. This wasn't one of his usual shore leave romances; it was something different. The night before, Kirk had told him eagerly that he'd found out that Eileen was one of the passengers they were to take to the new colony on Tandor II.

There was nothing very particular about Eileen. She was good looking, but not extraordinarily attractive. Yet Kirk's feelings for this young woman went deeper than any he'd had for a female in a long time. The dance floor was empty except for Kirk and Eileen. The lighting of the room was subdued and the music soft. When the song came finally to an end, Kirk stopped dancing, put an arm around Eileen and led her back over to the table where McCoy was sitting.

Both starship officers wore civilian clothes on this last evening of their shore leave. McCoy glanced at his friend and smiled. Kirk was wearing casual flannel pants and a simple shirt; he was attention-catching even without that gold braid shirt of his.

Briefly, McCoy wondered why the younger man had invited him to come along this night. Sometimes it seemed as if Kirk wanted some kind of approval from his friend. McCoy grinned broadly at them as the couple reached the table.

"The two of you make quite a good team. Perhaps you ought to think about entering the dancing contest we'll have on board in a couple of weeks."

Kirk grinned at his partner and looked deeply into her eyes for a moment before answering. "Watch out, Bones - we just might do that."

McCoy finished his mint julep and looked at Kirk. "It's getting late, Jim. I think it's time for an old country doctor to turn in." Getting up, he grinned. "But remember that Starship Captains need a few hours of sleep, too. See he gets some rest, will you, Eileen?"

She smiled back at him. "Sure, Doc. I wouldn't want Jim exhausted, you know."

Suddenly, she staggered, tried to get a hold on the table, but failed. Kirk caught her just as she fainted.

McCoy was at her side instantly, and reached for her pulse. Kirk looked at him anxiously.

"What is it, Bones?"

McCoy released her wrist. "Her pulse is very fast, but that's all I can tell right now."

Eileen's eyes fluttered open. "What happened?" she asked.

"You fainted. How do you feel, Eileen?" Kirk helped her gently into a chair.

She took a deep breath. "I'm all right, Jim. I just got giddy."

McCoy looked at her with concern. "I think it'll be best if you come along to my apartment. I have my medikit there and I'll give you a quick check over."

"That won't be necessary, Doc. I feel fine now."

"Sure you feel all right, darling?" Kirk asked, caressing her cheek.

She nodded, but McCoy was insistant. "I still think it's better for me to check her over."

She shook her head, and Kirk looked at his friend. "She's probably all right, Bones. I'll take her home and see that she gets some rest."

McCoy still looked doubtful, but gave in. "All right, Jim. And see that you get some rest yourself. I'll see you at the shuttle terminal tomorrow morning."

McCoy wasn't exactly in the best of moods when he made his way to the terminal the next morning. *Why do shore leaves always have to be so damn short?* he wondered.

When he arrived at the terminal, Kirk was already waiting for him. Grinning, he greeted his friend.

"Did you sleep well, Bones?"

"Yeah, I guess so," the doctor grumbled. "But tell me, how do you always manage to be in a good mood in the morning?"

"You know that's not always the case, Bones. But I have some good news. Eileen - I mean, the scientists - have been temporarily assigned to the Enterprise; the establishing of the colony on Tandor II has been somewhat delayed. The time on the Enterprise will provide them with some first-hand experience of the problems they'll be dealing with. We'll be doing some mapping and patrolling, and you're to give the physicals to the personnel on the outposts on the way. How does that sound to you?"

Kirk's enthusiasm was contagious. McCoy found himself smiling in response. "Sounds great to me. Some peaceful routine is just what the crew needs. Even this two weeks' shore leave couldn't possibly make up for all the strain we've been going through in the last few months. Where's Eileen? I thought you'd be picking her up."

"She's just finishing packing. Toilet things, slippers, the last of her clothes. We're to meet her in about half an hour. Have you had breakfast yet, Bones?"

"Nope."

"All right, then. Let's go over to the coffee bar and get something to eat. I'm starving!"

"I bet you are - as usual."

They were not joined by Eileen until after they had finished their meal. She was carrying a light suitcase; the rest of her baggage had already been beamed aboard the Enterprise.

Kirk and Eileen were engaged in light conversation as they crossed over to the Galileo II. The shuttlecraft had been completely overhauled at the terminal as required by Starfleet regulations. McCoy didn't care too much about the technical requirements, but he was happy that for once he didn't have to get his molecules scrambled by the transporter, since Kirk was taking the shuttle back home. He caught himself looking forward to getting back aboard, too. Hell - yes, he admitted it. The Starship had become a home for him.

"Aren't you coming, Bones?" Kirk interrupted his train of thought.

The journey back to the Enterprise was uneventful. Once back home, Kirk showed Eileen around. She could tell he was very proud; this was his home, and he wanted to share it with Eileen.

McCoy kept them company as they made their way to the bridge. Here, Kirk introduced Eileen to Spock, a task to which he had been looking forward yet wanted to avoid at the same time. But when Kirk looked at his friend, there was only approval and understanding in the dark eyes.

Kirk smiled at him. "I should be catching up on ship's business. Would you care for a game of chess tonight, though, Spock?"

Spock nodded. "Yes, Captain."

Turning to leave, Kirk said, "I'll be in my cabin, Spock, in case I'm needed. Could you see Eileen to her quarters, Bones?"

"Sure thing," McCoy said as the turbolift doors closed behind them.

Eileen had been assigned to regular quarters because she would be staying on the Enterprise for several weeks at least. She was sharing with a junior lieutenant. As she made friends easily, this didn't pose any problem, and she was on friendly terms with Angela Crater right from the beginning.

She felt very tired. The tour of the ship had been quite exhausting, but it had been good to see Jim in his own environment. She had been able to share some of the pride Jim held for his ship and crew, and Eileen was grateful that she could spend some time on the ship which was renowned for its efficiency throughout the Federation. She had been excited when she discovered that it was the Enterprise that was to transport the scientists to Tandor II.

At that time she didn't anticipate, of course, that she would fall in love with the ship's captain. Kirk had quite a reputation

going, but when Eileen had met him, he had been completely different from anything she had imagined.

They had met in a small bar away from the usual amusement centres. Eileen had recognised Kirk from pictures she had seen.

Yet she wasn't quite sure what had started their romance in the first place. Kirk's handsome face had looked tired and drawn. After some conversation, Eileen had invited him to join her for a quiet evening in her apartment. One evening had become every evening for a fortnight. Eileen's cheerful company had helped Kirk to recover from the immense strain he had been suffering prior to this shore leave.

The Enterprise crew had become involved in a civil war on a planet where they were supposed to act as mediators between the two hostile parties. Several of the senior officers had been wounded in a surprise attack.

Even though Kirk himself hadn't been injured, he was completely exhausted mentally. Spock had been severely wounded in the raid, and although he was now well on the road to recovery and back to light duty, Kirk hadn't wanted to leave him. McCoy had practically dragged Kirk down for shore leave on medical orders, and as things turned out, he'd done the right thing.

Eileen smiled to herself. McCoy was a nice guy. When Jim had introduced them, she had liked him instantly. The doctor was very outspoken, and yet he was a gentleman in every sense of the word. Eileen had been able to sense the warm friendship that existed between Jim and McCoy. Yes, her time on the Enterprise was going to be good.

Eileen realised that she had wandered around her cabin idly for the last fifteen minutes. Angela had gone on duty, but Eileen decided that she had better use the time to get settled. She looked at the wall chronometer.

McCoy had told her to come down to sickbay for her physical at 17.00 hours. That left her about an hour to get her stuff straightened out.

Some forty-five minutes later, Eileen stepped out of the shower. She changed into a standard coverall for convenience. Then she brushed her hair. She didn't feel like putting on any makeup right now. Well, she hardly needed any down in sickbay. She was really tired, too. After the physical she'd have to doss down for an hour or two if she wanted to be awake tonight. Jim wouldn't like it if she was too sleepy to talk to him!

Eileen usually dreaded physicals, but this time she felt quite relaxed. In the short time she had known him, Eileen had already begun to trust McCoy. She realised that she even looked forward to chatting with the Doctor.

She had to wait for a few minutes when she arrived in sickbay, as McCoy had been called to an emergency down in Engineering. When he finally came through the door, McCoy smiled at her.

"I'm sorry that I had to keep you waiting. Well, we might as well get the physical over as fast as we can." Walking over to the diagnostic bed, he patted it. "Hop on here, will you?"



McCoy chatted to her about life on the Enterprise for the next ten minutes while he was busily taking the readings. Then, switching off the monitor above the bed, "All right, one more reading with this scanner, and then you're done."

The scanner he was holding was a more complicated version of the one he had in his field pack. He ran it over her arm.

"I'm taking a few readings on your blood," he explained. "They used actually to have to test it in the old days."

Suddenly, McCoy frowned and ran the scanner over Eileen's arm again, retaking the reading. "Hmmm... Well, I think I had better take a blood sample," he said, trying to hide his concern.

Eileen looked at him, somewhat alarmed. "Is something wrong, Doc?"

"No, no, you just seem to be a bit anaemic," McCoy answered in an attempt to reassure her. "Have you felt ill recently?"

"No, Doc. I told you yesterday, I'm fine." She had obviously calmed down again, yet McCoy noticed that she looked unusually pale.

"You haven't fainted again, have you?"

"No." Then, after a moment, she added, "Well, to be honest, I have felt dizzy once or twice, but I'm just tired, that's all. We had a lot to do, preparing for this trip."

"All right." McCoy walked over to a wall cabinet. Returning with two pills, he said, "I want you to go straight to your cabin, take these, and hit the sack. They'll make sure you get a good night's sleep."

"But Doc, I have a date with Jim - "

"That'll have to wait. I'll tell Jim I sent you to bed. He'll understand."

"But - "

"No 'buts', Eileen. This is a medical order. Follow it, or I'll have you confined to sickbay overnight." Grinning, he added, "You're just as pigheaded as Jim. Now, let me take that blood sample."

Drawing the blood was a matter of seconds. McCoy's fingers were skilled, and Eileen hardly felt a thing. While she was rolling down her sleeve, McCoy returned with a hypo. Pressing it to her arm, he said, "Here - this ought to make you feel better. Now, off you go!"

McCoy walked back to his office in a daze.

He had given the vial containing the blood sample to one of the duty nurses, ordering her to take it to the lab immediately.

He sat at his desk. There was nothing he could do but wait for the result. Yet McCoy was already sure of what they would find; he dreaded having his diagnosis confirmed.

This just wasn't fair. Jim had lost too many people already!

Even though Jim Kirk was known as a womaniser, McCoy knew that Kirk had been suffering, and each time he had lost someone dear, he had been hurt just a little more deep down inside. It wasn't obvious, of course; Kirk was functioning as brilliantly as ever, but in his position as Chief Medical Officer and also as personal friend, McCoy had become acutely aware of the inner turmoil in his friend.

The last few months in particular had put enormous pressure onto the young man's shoulders. They had been involved in quite a few dangerous missions, just after a short period of time when Kirk had lost two loved ones; his Indian 'wife' and the android Rayna.

Well, in the first case Kirk hadn't been completely himself, yet he had loved Miramanee deeply, and she had been bearing his child. Perhaps the knowledge that her people survived had helped Kirk a little.

In the second case, McCoy had got the feeling that Kirk had had some outside help in coming to terms with his loss. Yet the losses remained a fact, and it wasn't just those recent cases which added to the strain that Jim had been under. For at least one other case, McCoy felt himself directly responsible.

If he hadn't been careless with the cordrazine-containing hypo, Jim wouldn't have had to go through the nightmarish experience with Edith Keeler. McCoy was aware that blaming himself for what had happened was illogical. As Spock had pointed out, it had been an accident, and yet...

McCoy had been extremely grateful when Kirk had met Eileen. She seemed to be complementing him just perfectly. And now...

The buzzer of his office door was sounding. A young lab technician entered with a report and a computer tape. McCoy dismissed him, saying, "It's all right, just put the report on my desk."

Not until the lab technician had left did McCoy pick up the report and glance over it quickly.

Sighing, he put the computer tape in a viewer and activated the viewscreen. After studying the readout, he switched it off, and then sat in silence for quite some time.

How was he going to tell this news to Jim Kirk?

McCoy knew that it was his duty to inform the Captain if any crew member - or passenger, for that matter - was seriously ill. Yet McCoy didn't have any idea how he could face Jim and tell him that his girl friend was going to die.

The disease had first been discovered by Andorian scientists and had been labelled with a complicated and unpronounceable Andorian name, but it was usually referred to as 'leukaemia ignota', 'unknown leukaemia', for it did indeed resemble that disease in its earlier stages. A lot of research had been done, but the scientists hadn't come up with any specific results.

The disease wasn't contagious, even though a virus was supposed to trigger off a reaction in the body of the victim. Yet the scientists had been able to prove that a virus alone couldn't be the

cause; it only affected people who had a certain genetic predisposition to contract it; thus it was, in essence, a hereditary disease.

Only a few dozen cases had become known after the discovery of the disease, so it could safely be considered very rare - but in all of those few cases it had proved to be fatal.

The doctors working on the research project were sure that once the virus triggering off the reaction was identified, it would be fairly easy to vaccinate against it; but there was no cure.

In scientific language, it all sounded very simple; first the red corpuscles were slowly destroyed, then in the later stages, the major organs also became affected.

Could he dare tell Eileen about it?

McCoy himself had had to face imminent death by a similar disease only a few months previously, and only by chance had they discovered that Fabrini miracle cure at the last moment. But there was nothing in the Fabrini records about unknown leukaemia.

He remembered very vividly what he had gone through, and he also remembered something in Eileen's psychological profile that made him decide against telling her.

Eileen was likely to panic when exposed to strain - a reason why she hadn't been accepted into Starfleet when she applied, a few years previously. Even though she was now working for Starfleet, she was a civilian scientist, and the chance that she might be exposed to danger and strain on a colony was very slight.

Yet this characteristic was something which made Eileen different from the women Kirk came across in his everyday life, and perhaps it was that which had triggered off his special reaction to her.

It was almost unthinkable that Jim should lose her.

Maybe there was a mistake in the computer's analysis or his own diagnosis? It was a straw, but McCoy clutched at it desperately. Just maybe Spock would be able to prove him wrong; there was nothing he wished for more.

Yes, he would need the Vulcan's help. He reached for the intercom.

"McCoy to bridge."

"Kirk here. What is it, Bones?"

Damn, Jim is still on duty! McCoy was grateful that the contact was audio only. He knew he wasn't up to facing Kirk right now. How could he possibly tell him...? *Oh, God, I hope I'm wrong!*

"Bones? Is something wrong?" There was concern in Kirk's voice.

"No." McCoy tried to make his voice sound even. "No, sorry I kept you waiting. My mind was wandering. Can you spare Spock up there? I need his advice with some data."

"Sure, Bones. He isn't on the bridge but down in the science labs. I'll tell him to stop by your office once he's finished there."

"Thanks, Jim."

"You're welcome." A pause, then, "You all right, Bones? Want to see me about anything?"

Shit, why had Jim always to be so perceptive? "No, I'm fine, Jim. Just tired, I guess. I'll turn in early tonight." He broke the connection without waiting for an answer, then tried to settle comfortably in his chair to wait for Spock.

I must have been more tired than I realised, he thought about half an hour later when he was startled by his door buzzer. Must have fallen asleep. Didn't think I could. He straightened somewhat before calling, "Come."

The Vulcan entered. "The Captain told me you needed my assistance concerning some data."

"Spock, I want you to prove me wrong," McCoy said, motioning towards the computer printout lying on his desk.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "A somewhat unusual request coming from you, but I shall do my best."

The next few minutes were spent in silence while Spock went over, first the computer analysis, then McCoy's hand-written notes. Finally he looked up.

"I cannot find any fault in the computer's interpretation or in your own notes, Doctor."

McCoy slammed his fist hard on his desk. "Damn! Damn, why...?" He broke off, realising that Spock was looking at him with... what was it? Alarm? Concern?... in his eyes. "Sorry," he mumbled, slumping back into his chair.

"Doctor, what is wrong? You seem... disturbed."

"It's that thing," McCoy said, indicating the report. "You know what the data add up to?"

"I believe I do, Doctor. The symptoms plus the data calculated by the computer would indicate it to be a case of what has become known as leukaemia ignota, a rather rare disease."

"Right. Just that, my brilliant Vulcan. I bet you could even calculate the exact odds... Sorry, Spock. This - I hoped you might find something wrong with my calculations. It's terminal, you know, and..." He fell silent, looking at Spock helplessly.

"I understand, Doctor. But such things do occur."

McCoy looked at the Vulcan again, and he saw that rare flicker of warmth and understanding in the dark eyes that Spock normally kept carefully hidden. Somehow the silent message passed between the two men, and suddenly McCoy felt he could at least pull himself together enough to fill Spock in on the details.

The Vulcan sat listening in silence to the repeated description

of the symptoms, and McCoy felt that sharing the knowledge with someone made it actually easier to bear. Yet when he came to the real problem, he found his voice failing him again.

"The psychological profile of the patient indicates that telling her about the exact situation might impose a strain on her that she couldn't deal with. But... But... I'll have to tell Jim." He hadn't mentioned the name of the patient yet.

"Doctor, it is part of the Captain's duty to keep himself informed about the health of the crew. He might be dismayed by the knowledge that a crewmember is seriously ill, but I do not see any serious problem."

"It's not a crewmember I was talking about, Spock. It's Eileen. Jim's girl friend."

McCoy saw Spock stiffen. The next moment the Vulcan mask slipped back into place. Yet there was a note of hesitation in his voice when he spoke. "That... would seem to complicate things."

"Complicate things! You know as well as I do that there is a certain limit to what a man can endure! I don't dare tell him."

"Doctor, you will have to tell him eventually. Besides - don't you think it would be even more of a shock if he saw her die, and you hadn't told him?"

Somehow, McCoy managed to consider this objectively. He nodded agreement.

"Guess you're right, Spock."

"If I can be of any help, Doctor - I could..."

"No," McCoy interjected, his professionalism slowly taking over again. "I'm the Chief Medical Officer of this ship, and it's my task to inform the Captain. Thanks anyway, Spock."

The Vulcan nodded acknowledgement, then, sensing McCoy's need for further reassurance, added, "I am glad I could be of help, Doctor. And... let me know if you need any assistance." He turned and left the room.

When the doors had closed behind the Vulcan, McCoy sat in silence. Of course Spock was right. Jim would have to know. It wasn't just because of Starfleet regulations either; Jim had a right to be informed as a friend, too. And Eileen; those last few weeks - or months - she had should be made worth while. It was best if Jim knew.

Yet McCoy dreaded the moment of telling Kirk. He didn't feel ready for it. Not just yet.

McCoy realised how tired he was, but he knew that sleep wouldn't come naturally with the state of mind he was in. He rose with a sigh and went over to the medicine cabinet. Taking out the glass bottle containing the red sleeping pills, he shook two out into his palm.

Since he knew that the pills wouldn't take long to take effect, McCoy decided to go to his cabin and then take them just before going to bed.

He checked with the young doctor on duty on his way out. There were no emergencies. It looked as if he was going to get a night of uninterrupted sleep.

The drug-induced sleep didn't refresh McCoy.

Twice during the night he wakened from nightmares, and he woke the next morning with a bad headache. He rose and went into the bathroom where he put his head directly under the water spout for a few moments. The clear, cold water refreshed him somewhat, and after he had had a large mug of steaming black coffee from the food dispenser, he felt better.

He decided to have breakfast in one of the rec rooms. Maybe there would be an opportunity to tell Jim...

He didn't follow that train of thought. Despite recognising the necessity of telling Jim the truth, McCoy still didn't want to think of it.

When he was passing Kirk's cabin on his way to the turbolift, McCoy heard Kirk singing, and stopped. Somehow, the door wasn't completely closed, and McCoy was able to make out the faint sound of water running and the Captain singing, as usual rather off-key. After a moment, McCoy recognised the song.

"...excavaaaating for a mine, lived a miner, forty-niner, and his daughter Clementine..."

McCoy smiled, but then it struck him why Kirk was singing. He was happy; in love; and he, McCoy, was about to destroy that happiness. It was so damn unfair! They had a right to have their share of happiness too. The dance in two weeks' time...

Kirk was at his refrain again. "... Oh my daaaaarling Clementine, thou art lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry, Clementiiine."

Lost and gone forever.

The irony of that line struck McCoy. Not Clementine, but Eileen. If Jim knew...

It was at that moment that McCoy decided he wouldn't tell Kirk right away. After all, Eileen's condition wasn't that bad at the moment. He didn't need to worry Jim just yet. It would give them a few happy days together.

McCoy also made up his mind when he was going to give the dreadful news to the Captain; it would be after the dance. That gave them a fortnight without the clouds of worry hanging over them - over Jim, for it would still be better if she did not know. A fortnight which would be hard on McCoy, since - for practical purposes - he had to bear the knowledge alone; as a Vulcan, Spock could remain detached. But he was more than willing to accept that, if only because of his friendship with Kirk.

The next two weeks passed uneventfully enough. McCoy didn't see very much of Kirk during that time, but that was something he was

almost glad about. Somehow he couldn't bring himself to face Kirk; the few times they had spent together in the mess there had been an air of awkwardness on McCoy's part. He was constantly afraid that his tongue might slip and he would reveal something about Eileen's illness. Yes, it was best that Kirk was spending most of his free time with Eileen.

McCoy was glad for their happiness; Kirk had relaxed visibly, and that was good. Yet McCoy dearly missed Kirk's company. Jim Kirk was the closest friend he had ever had in his whole life, and now that he didn't see much of him, he felt desperately lonely.

With a slight smile, McCoy thought of the incident in the rec room a couple of days ago. He had gone off duty but hadn't felt really tired. He had gone to the rec room hoping to find some company there, even someone who would join him for a drink, but as it had turned out, the rec room wasn't very busy, and he had taken himself off to a corner together with a bottle of Saurian brandy in order to drown his sorrows.

He had just downed his second - or was it his third? - glass when he had felt somebody's gaze on him, and looking up he had met the quietly worried eyes of the Enterprise's First Officer. McCoy couldn't tell now if it was the Vulcan's slight telepathic ability that had made him sense the Doctor's need for company and someone to confide in, or if it was just part of Spock's Human heritage that caused him to know that Leonard McCoy needed his assistance.

In the end, it didn't matter. The Vulcan had been there, quietly offering his help. McCoy remembered his words very well.

"Doctor, do you think it's wise...?" The sentence had been left unfinished, but the Vulcan had got his message across pretty well.

Momentarily at a loss as to what to say, the Vulcan had then asked McCoy whether he cared for a game of chess, forgetting that the Doctor had no more than elementary skill in that game. McCoy had declined, but had challenged Spock to a game of checkers instead, only to find himself losing in less than five minutes. First McCoy had been frustrated, but then, realising that he didn't stand a chance of winning against Spock in any kind of tactical game, he had asked the Vulcan to play ludo with him.

At first Spock had been inclined to turn down the Doctor's request, but then he realised that this might give McCoy the relaxation he so badly needed and agreed to the game. To his embarrassment, McCoy, who had drunk enough to be slightly tipsy, had risen and announced loudly that he and Spock were going to play ludo and that anyone was welcome to join them.

This was something really unusual, and Chekov, Sulu and two of their friends who had been playing cards in another corner had joined them, and a group of spectators soon surrounded them.

The game had lasted nearly two hours, and by the time it ended, McCoy was relaxed - and slightly more drunk, since alcohol (and other refreshments) had found their way into the stomachs of the eager players (except Spock's, of course) in abundance. The Doctor had argued that they needed to sustain their strength, and afterwards Chekov had provided a round of vodka for everybody in the room to celebrate his victory.

When McCoy, upon making his exit, had bumped into the wall and

complained that the door was purposely evading him, Spock decided that he had better accompany the Doctor to his quarters.

If Kirk had heard about the incident over the ship's grapevine, he gave no sign. Probably he was too busy with his own affairs to notice.

Anyway, this was the night of the dance sponsored by the ship's musical society. McCoy hadn't been able to talk his way out of attending it. He usually dreaded such large scale social occasions, but since even Spock had agreed to attend (rumour had it that he would be giving a special performance on his Vulcan lyrette), the ship's Chief Medical Officer could hardly chicken out.

Well, at least no dress uniforms were necessary. This was a casual style occasion, meaning either standard uniforms or, preferably, civilian-style clothing, and since he was a civilian at heart, there was no doubt which way McCoy would dress.

When McCoy emerged from his cabin half an hour later, he was clad in a one-piece green and yellow jumpsuit. Sure, the colours were somewhat gaudy, but McCoy liked it this way. It meant a break from the everyday routine. He remembered with a slight grin the odd stares that had met him the first few times he had dressed this way, but the crew had soon grown used to McCoy's individualistic style of off-duty dress.

He met Uhura at the turbolift. She wore an old African traditional costume in bright colours. McCoy gave her a brief hug and a peck on the cheek before stepping into the lift with the words, "You look great tonight."

"You, too." Uhura smiled at him. "Are you entering the contest tonight?"

"Entering the contest? Me? You know I don't like these exotic fashion dances."

"Oh, I'm sure we have something for everybody. Even for you, Leonard."

The evening was in full swing when the dance contest was finally announced. McCoy was seated at a table with Chekov, Scott, and some of the engineering staff.

Some time earlier, Kirk had come over to say hello. He wore jeans and one of his favourite checkered flannel shirts. He had had a happy grin on his face, and had clapped McCoy on the shoulder, thanking him for coming along to the dance - since he knew that McCoy usually tried to avoid such events. It was then that McCoy started to drink in earnest. Tomorrow was the day when he would have to tell Jim... Originally, he had come to the dance, albeit halfheartedly, hoping that it would take his mind off things; but when that failed, he tried to seek refuge in the temporary oblivion of alcoholic stupor.

When the contest commenced, McCoy suddenly rose and exclaimed, "I can outdrink everybody here. Anyone want to give it a try?"

The words had been slurred, but they were clear enough to be picked up by the Vulcan's ears. Spock, who was sitting with some

other scientists at a neighbouring table, excused himself, rose and walked over to the Doctor's table, sensing that McCoy was troubled again.

He touched McCoy's elbow. McCoy half turned, staggered, and nearly fell. Spock caught and steadied him, then urged him to take a seat.

Seating himself next to McCoy, Spock said, "You are intoxicated, Doctor. Perhaps it would be better if you took a rest."

"Baloney. I feel just great. I want to - "

At that moment Uhura went up onto the podium and raised her hand for silence. The music stopped and everybody turned to listen. Uhura flashed a smile in McCoy's direction and said, "I know there are those among you who prefer traditional music, so I have asked our ensemble to prepare a square dance hors concours. Everybody is welcome to join in."

The small ensemble started to play and McCoy got up again. "That's what I want! I want to dance, Spock. C'mon, you be my partner," he said and tugged the surprised Vulcan along to the dance floor.

When Spock recovered from his initial surprise, he stopped the Doctor, taking a firm grip of his shoulder. "Doctor, excuse me - I'm afraid I don't know this dance and I don't want to join you."

McCoy tried to free himself from the Vulcan's grasp, and when Spock let him go, he lost his balance and sat on the floor with a rather heavy thud. The fall brought him to his senses, and, embarrassed, he was aware of several pairs of curious eyes turned towards him. He struggled to his feet, cursing under his breath, and made for the door as steadily as he could.

He went to sickbay, aware that he had to get that alcohol out of his system as fast as he could. When he reached sickbay, he went straight to the bathroom where he was violently sick. He emerged several minutes later, looking pale but feeling somewhat better.

Chapel, who was on night duty, returned from her round through the ward. "Doctor! Leonard, you look awful. What happened?"

McCoy looked at her and managed a weak smile. "Guess I drank a bit too much. I'll take an antitoxin and doze down in my office for half an hour." When he noticed the concerned look on her face, he added, "Really, no need to worry. I brought most of the stuff up, anyway. I'll be all right."

He went to the medicine cabinet, swallowed two pills, then went to his office to lie down on the couch there. After a few minutes, he drifted off to sleep.

An insistent beep from the intercom woke him about forty five minutes later. He rose, grimaced, and switched on the intercom.

"McCoy here. What is it?"

"Medical emergency in the main rec room."

"All right, I'm on my way."

McCoy put on his boots and hurried into the ward to collect his med pouch and a field kit, to be prepared for whatever awaited him in the rec room. While he got his things ready, he spoke to Chapel.

"Get the intensive care unit ready. And Chris, get me a couple of headache pills from the medicine cabinet, will you. I'm starting a father of a hangover."

As he was about to leave sickbay, Chapel approached him. He noticed the hypo in her hand and grimaced. "I'd prefer a pill..."

"This is much faster, Doctor."

"Yes, I know, Chris. Go ahead."

The hypo hissed against his arm, and after a few seconds he could feel its effects. By the time he reached the rec room, his headache was gone.

McCoy took in the scene at one glance.

The party had broken up. A group of people was gathered in the middle of the room. They quickly made room for him when he approached.

Kirk was kneeling over the prone form of Eileen, who was lying on the floor. He was holding her head, as if that alone would help.

McCoy knelt down next to Kirk. He ran a scanner over her. At least she was only unconscious, and not comatose as he had initially feared. He shot the contents of a hypo into her arm and then turned towards Kirk.

"Jim, let her go. A medical team is on its way with a trolley."

As he spoke, medics rushed into the room with a gurney. Kirk began to rise to help get Eileen onto the stretcher, but suddenly let out a grunt of pain.

McCoy turned towards him, alarmed. "What is it, Jim?"

"My foot. I must have twisted it when I tried to break Eileen's fall."

While the med techs got Eileen onto the trolley, McCoy ran his scanner over Kirk's ankle. "Seems like you've only sprained it, but you'd better come to sickbay to get it X-rayed. I'll ask for another stretcher."

"No, I can walk."

With McCoy's help, Kirk got to his feet, and placing an arm around McCoy's shoulder, he managed to hobble down to sickbay. There, McCoy left him in Chapel's care while he himself went to get Eileen safely hooked up on life support.

When McCoy left her about an hour later, her condition was stable and a life-giving transfusion was dripping into the vein of her arm. With a last glance at the indicator, McCoy went to see his other patient.

He found Kirk sitting on the edge of a bunk, his left ankle firmly bandaged. When McCoy entered the room, Chapel rose from the desk. "Here is the report, Doctor. It's just a simple sprain."

"All right. Thanks, Chris. I'll take over. You can go. Good night."

McCoy busied himself over the report. When Chapel had gone, Kirk started to get up, but when he put his foot on to the ground, a grunt escaped him again.

McCoy looked up. "Take that as a lesson. Where the hell do you think you are going, anyway?"

"I've got to see Eileen. Can't you give me something for the pain? How is she, anyway?"

"She's asleep. So there's nothing you can do right now."

"But what's the matter with her, Bones? She suddenly passed out. What happened?"

"Just what you said - she passed out. She's all right now. We can talk about what happened tomorrow... For now, I want you to stay in sickbay overnight and get some rest."

"Why, Bones? You could fit my boot with an antigrav sole."

"I know you would spend the night pacing your cabin, and that wouldn't do your foot any good, even with an antigrav sole. Down here, I can keep an eye on you as well as on Eileen. Now lie back on that bunk while I get you a cover." Noticing Kirk's frown, he added, "Doctor's orders."

Kirk gave a resigned shrug. "O.K. But promise to tell me when Eileen wakes," he said, beginning to pull his uniform top off.

"Sure."

McCoy went over to a wall cabinet to get a light thermal blanket. It was a promise he could make easily enough, for Eileen was heavily sedated and wouldn't waken before morning anyway. He tossed Kirk the blanket. "Be a good boy and cuddle up under the covers."

Kirk obeyed without any further protest, but started up when he saw McCoy preparing a hypo. "What is that?"

McCoy placed a gentle but firm hand on Kirk's bare shoulder and pushed him back against the pillow. "Something for the pain in your ankle." He didn't add that he had also slipped in a tranquilliser.

"Bones, it isn't that bad. I don't need..."

McCoy pressed the hypo home. "You were complaining badly enough a few minutes ago. And who's the doctor around here? Now try to relax."

Kirk was already beginning to feel the effect of the drug. He was getting drowsy.

"Bones, what did you give me? That wasn't just a painkiller. I'm dizzy. You promised you would tell me... what's the... matter..."

with... Eileen..." His eyes drooped shut.

"Eileen is fine for the moment. We'll talk in the morning. Sleep now," McCoy said, gently pulling the cover up to his friend's shoulders.

When Kirk was tucked up and fast asleep, McCoy left him and settled himself at his desk, preparing himself for what he knew was going to be a long night. Sickbay wasn't crowded; there was only two other patients beside Eileen and Kirk. That was why McCoy had relieved Chapel. She wasn't really needed and could probably do with some extra sleep. He knew he was going to spend a sleepless night anyway, so he might as well work on the regular reports to Starfleet Command which were waiting to be finished.

The hours seemed to drag along endlessly. McCoy checked on his patients twice, but all were fast asleep. There weren't any complications with Eileen, and on his second round McCoy disconnected the finished transfusion tube from her arm. He would probably be able to release her from sickbay in a day or two.

It was Kirk that McCoy was more worried about. How was he going to take the news that his girl friend was fatally ill? McCoy got up to replace the cover Kirk had tossed from the bed in his restless slumber, for in spite of the sedative McCoy had given him, Kirk's sleep seemed troubled, and his body was covered with cold sweat. Undoubtedly Kirk was having bad dreams, and McCoy wondered if he had done the right thing in giving him the sedative and forcing him to sleep as worried as he was. Yet he knew that Kirk was going to need every hour of sleep he could get now, for he would probably have trouble sleeping once he knew what was the matter with Eileen.

McCoy took a towel and started to dry off Kirk's sweaty torso and brow. Though the touch did not rouse him, Kirk stirred, and McCoy felt a lump forming in his throat when he caught the word, "Eileen..." that Kirk was murmuring in his sleep.

He felt helpless.

What could he do? He reached for Kirk's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. He would have had to give him a knockout drug in order to keep the worries from haunting Kirk in his sleep, and that was something which McCoy did not want to do unless absolutely necessary.

The touch seemed to have comforted Kirk's troubled mind somewhat. With a low sigh he turned onto his side and gradually slipped into the realms of deeper and truly relaxing sleep.

McCoy went to check on Eileen once again. He glanced up at the indicators. All the readings were steady. Then he reached for Eileen's wrist. He trusted this simple method more than all the technical equipment. Her pulse was perhaps a bit fast, but strong and steady. McCoy let go of her wrist. There wasn't anything he could do for her right now. He himself was feeling worn out and dog tired. While he watched Eileen's peaceful face, he decided that some hours of sleep would do him good, too. The monitors would waken him the instant anything went wrong with any of his patients, so there was nothing wrong with taking a nap. He wondered if he would be able to sleep, but his eyes closed almost the moment his head touched the pillow on the couch in his office.

McCoy had fallen asleep in the early morning hours. He woke after about four hours of undisturbed sleep. He left his office to make his rounds through the ward. Everything was still quiet and his patients were all asleep. He knew that Eileen, at least, wouldn't waken for another couple of hours yet.

He went back into the main room and got two mugs of coffee from the food dispenser when he noticed that Kirk was beginning to stir. He took one over to Kirk's bunk and shook him lightly.

Kirk, only half awake, pulled the blanket over his head and grumbled, "Lemme sleep."

McCoy shook his shoulder a little more strongly. "Come on, Jim, time to get up. Here's some coffee."

After a moment's silence, Kirk pushed back the covers and looked up at McCoy. "I'm still groggy. What did you give me last night, Bones?"

"A sedative, to help you sleep. You were sick with worry."

"Didn't I have a right to be? How is Eileen, anyway? Can I see her?" Kirk took a sip from the coffee mug McCoy had given him, realising it would help him to waken properly.

"She's still asleep. You can look in on her after breakfast."

"No way, Doctor. I want to see her right now, and I don't want any breakfast."

"All right, Jim, let's make a bargain. You go and see Eileen for a minute and then take a shower and have some breakfast in my office. We'll have a little talk afterwards."

Despite McCoy's attempt to sound cheerful, Kirk noticed the strain in his friend's voice. "Agreed. And Bones, I didn't mean to sound the way I just did."

McCoy managed a grin. "It's O.K., Jim."

He accompanied Kirk to the ICU where Eileen was sleeping. The sterile atmosphere was always depressing, even for someone as used to it as McCoy. Kirk stood looking down at Eileen, then extended a hand to stroke her face very gently.

McCoy felt that the atmosphere was getting to Kirk more than he was willing to admit. He touched his friend's elbow lightly.

"Let's go, Jim. You don't want to waken her, do you?"

Outside, he guided Kirk to a chair. The Captain sat down heavily.

"Bones, she's so pale. What's the matter with her?"

McCoy had hoped to put off the revelation for a few minutes longer, but realised that that couldn't be done. Kirk was extraordinarily perceptive anyway, and now he had that sixth sense of a lover which made him even more astute. He felt instinctively that

there was something seriously wrong with his beloved, and McCoy had no right to keep him in the dark any longer.

"Come on, Jim. We'll talk in my office."

He led Kirk to the couch in his office and for a moment busied himself examining and rebandaging Kirk's ankle. "I'll start you on some sonic treatment this afternoon. Just take things easy for a few days, and your ankle will be all right by the end of the week."

Kirk looked up at him. "This wasn't what we came here for, Bones, was it?"

McCoy still didn't answer him right away. He crossed to his desk and got out two glasses and a brandy bottle. He then returned to the couch, and seated himself beside Kirk. He filled the glasses to the brim and handed one over. Taking a large swallow from his own drink, he said, "Drink it, Jim. You'll need it."

Kirk barely touched his drink. He looked at McCoy expectantly. The Doctor finished his drink and put the glass down on the floor before he broke the silence. "Dammit! There's no easy way to give this to you, Jim. Eileen's sick - very sick. No, it's not obvious right now, but..." He stopped and looked at his friend. Kirk hadn't moved an inch. This was going to be even harder than he had thought. "The condition is known as leukaemia ignota. It's a very rare hereditary blood disease. We are not sure what causes it. Scientists have been at it for years. They think there's some kind of virus involved, but haven't been able to trace it down. There's no cure, Jim."

Kirk didn't answer. McCoy shook him slightly. "Jim. Jim!"

Without turning his head, Kirk said, "It had to happen. How long?"

McCoy had tried to anticipate Kirk's reaction, and had prepared himself for a lot of things - denial, anger, but not this quiet acceptance. For a moment he didn't know what to say, but then he remembered Kirk's question.

"I can't be sure, Jim. There is too little known about the disease. Two months, three months, maybe even half a year, but the result will be the same. Eileen won't be in pain until the very last stages of the disease when it affects the organs. Until then, transfusions and maybe some of the new Fabrini drugs will ease the symptoms. I'll keep searching for a cure, of course, but -" McCoy stopped and looked at Kirk. He had paled visibly. His face was ashen. "Jim, I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do."

Suddenly, there was a clatter as the glass Kirk had been holding broke. He had crushed it in his hands. He didn't even seem to feel the pain of the glass cutting into his hands. He had begun to sob quietly. The tears were running down his face without his uttering a sound. McCoy didn't know what to do at first, but after a moment he gathered Kirk into his arms and rode the spasms out with him.

After a few minutes Kirk quietened down somewhat. His hands were still bleeding. Easing him back onto the cushions of the couch, McCoy said, "Stay here a moment. I'll just go and get my medikit." McCoy knew that he was talking just for the sake of saying something, for Kirk wasn't in any fit state to go anywhere.

When McCoy returned with the medikit a few minutes later, Kirk's flow of tears had finally ceased. He was lying back on the couch, his face and eyes red and his fists tightly clenched.

McCoy came to his side. "Open your hands so I can clean you up, Jim."

After a moment, Kirk obeyed. McCoy sprayed a local anaesthetic onto the badly cut hands. When it had taken effect, he worked silently over the hands for a few minutes, finally ending the procedure by applying a spray dressing. He collected his instruments and took a step back. "How does that feel, Jim?"

Kirk looked up at him. "Feel? I haven't got any feeling in my hands."

"Good. When the local wears off there shouldn't be anything but a mild discomfort. It might itch somewhat. Let me know if it starts hurting, will you?"

There was a short silence before Kirk spoke. "Bones, why didn't you tell me something before this? Why didn't she tell me?"

"Eileen doesn't know." McCoy filled Kirk in on the details of Eileen's psychological profile and also the reasons why he had not informed Kirk right away.

Kirk took in the news silently. After a while, he said, "I think I ought to be grateful for what you did, but right now I haven't any feeling left."

"Sure, Jim. I understand. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No. Can I go to my quarters?"

"Certainly, but you are off duty for the rest of the day."

Kirk got up to leave, but McCoy stopped him. "I wouldn't go out into the hall that way, Jim. Why don't you take a shower? I'll get your uniform ready."

Kirk left for sickbay's bathroom, and McCoy went to a small wall cabinet where he always kept a spare uniform for Kirk. Sometimes McCoy wondered why the Captain's quarters weren't designed as a part of sickbay. *Judging from how often I have Jim as a 'guest' down here, it would certainly be an advantage, McCoy thought grimly.*

When Kirk emerged from the shower ten minutes later, he was clad in a bath robe and looked somewhat better. He went back into McCoy's office where he donned his uniform.

McCoy looked at his friend with some concern and said, "Are you sure that there is nothing I can do to help you over this?"

Kirk smiled at him, weakly. "No, Bones. Just don't mention it any more."

McCoy abided by Kirk's wishes, and so the next few weeks passed as if nothing had been said. Kirk settled back into routine with remarkable ease, but McCoy suspected that there was some trouble brewing though he couldn't figure out what gave him that idea.

About ten days after the incident in sickbay, the Enterprise received new orders. The sealed tape Kirk received in his quarters read as follows:

To Captain James T. Kirk, commanding U.S.S. Enterprise:
abandon present mission and proceed to Starbase 8 at top warp to pick up diplomats for transport to Druma VI.
Stay there until Druma question is settled.

Kirk didn't like the new orders at all, and even Spock admitted to a certain degree of apprehension in this case. Druma VI was a planet near the Romulan Neutral Zone, and therefore valuable as an outpost for the Federation. The Drumans hadn't reached spaceflight capability yet, but in face of their important position, Starfleet had been delighted when part of the Druman government had applied for membership to the Federation. The only problem was that the opinion on membership was not unanimous. There was a strong neutralist movement, and a few even called for joining the Klingon-Romulan alliance. That was the reason why Starfleet sent a few of their best diplomats to persuade the reluctant members of the Druman Planetary Council that it would be in their best interests to join the Federation.

Having diplomats aboard always gave Kirk a headache, but this close to the Neutral Zone it made him become fidgety and short tempered. The knowledge of Eileen's illness added to his burdens, though he tried to ban that thought from his mind.

Eileen had been released from sickbay the day after Kirk himself, and her condition remained stable. She was maybe a little paler than before, but otherwise Kirk didn't notice any change, not even during the hours they spent together.

McCoy watched over Eileen anxiously. Sometimes he had a dim feeling that she sensed instinctively that there was something serious wrong with her despite all his efforts to keep it from her. The treatment he gave her was indeed very similar to that for a person with anaemia. He had her put on a special diet and prescribed a daily exercise programme. For the moment she wasn't getting worse, but she wasn't getting better, either.

When McCoy heard of their new orders, he smiled at Kirk, who had brought the news to him personally.

"Fine - this will give the crew a chance to get some more R & R. Druma has a lot of untouched wild landscapes, doesn't it? Want to go bear 'hunting' again?"

"I don't think Eileen and I will go down this time, Bones. We'll just enjoy ourselves aboard ship as much as we can while we hang round in orbit."

"Bull. Some clean mountain air will do Eileen heaps of good, and you too, for that matter." Kirk had lost weight over the last few weeks; more than McCoy liked him to lose. He hadn't said anything but he was concerned. When he saw Kirk hesitate, he added, "I'll include that in my log as a medical recommendation, Jim."

Kirk smiled. "All right, Bones, I'll ask Eileen what she thinks about it, and if she wants to, we'll go."

Eileen was delighted with the proposal, and so they made preparations for their shore leave.

The trip to Druma was uneventful, yet Kirk was glad when the Enterprise was safely locked into orbit and he was rid of the diplomats.

He went down to sickbay to collect the headache pills which had become an everyday routine. He was prone to headaches, but recently they had begun to haunt him daily. When he entered sickbay, he found McCoy busily collecting equipment and putting it all in a large black shoulder bag.

"Are you expecting to come across some kind of epidemic on your shore leave, Bones?" he asked as he downed the pills which McCoy had wordlessly given him.

"In fact, no, but I'll need a lot of supplies for Eileen."

"Don't tell me you plan to join us!"

"Sorry about that, Jim. I have to keep an eye on Eileen constantly. Her condition has deteriorated somewhat, and I don't want it to get worse any quicker than it has to."

Kirk stood for a moment, fuming silently; he had wanted these days alone with her. Then he recognised that McCoy was right, and apologised quietly.

"It's all right, Jim. Do you think I'll enjoy constantly watching over a pair of turtle doves?"

Kirk managed a grin, and turned to go. "Well, let's try to make the best of it. So - don't forget to bring that nice little bottle of yours."

Eileen didn't object to the doctor's presence at all. She had come to like McCoy and was looking forward to having him for company. "It will give me someone to talk to, should you decide to go mountaineering," she had told Kirk.

Knowing that diplomatic red tape usually took quite a while to unwind, they had rented a cabin in the woods at the foot of the mountains. Eileen loved the little cabin and quickly went about making it as homey as possible.

The days passed pleasantly enough. Occasionally Kirk did go on excursions of his own, but most of the time he went hiking together with Eileen and McCoy. It was on one of those trips that things took a turn that neither of the men had foreseen.

They set out on their excursion early in the morning just after sunrise. Since they wanted to make it a whole-day trip, Eileen had prepared a lunch bag for each of them, and Kirk was carrying their provisions in a light knapsack. They had decided to follow the brook which was flowing near their cabin back to its source. Since there was a mountain trail leading right along it, McCoy reckoned that the trip shouldn't be too difficult even for Eileen.

The day was beautiful.



McCoy trailed somewhat behind and watched Kirk and Eileen, who were walking hand in hand a few yards ahead of him. At the beginning of their leave, McCoy had been afraid that maybe these expeditions would be too much of a strain on Eileen but they actually seemed to be doing her some good, for a little colour had returned to her pale cheeks and she was getting a nice tan even though McCoy had noticed that she had lost some more weight. He wished that this idyllic leave could last indefinitely. Even Kirk seemed to be forgetting some of the worries that were haunting him. McCoy himself could not forget the burden of his knowledge about Eileen's condition completely, and he still occasionally had a strange feeling that something was about to happen, but he couldn't quite pinpoint the cause.

Suddenly he became aware of a distant rumbling sound, and he saw, first, some small pebbles, and then larger rocks, rolling down the mountain slope at an alarming speed.

All of a sudden, everything seemed to be happening in slow motion as the rumbling changed to a threatening thunder.

"Watch out, Jim!" McCoy heard himself call out.

Kirk didn't seem to move for an eternity, and then Eileen shoved him back with a strength McCoy would not have thought her frail body capable of. She started after him, but she was too late. The avalanche hit her full force and she was buried under a heap of rocks. Though McCoy was not hit, he was hurled to the ground by the vibration of the cascade.

Despite his years of medical training and experience, McCoy had to fight down the panic which was about to seize him. When he had recovered from his fall, he rushed over to Kirk's side.

The Captain was unconscious, and bleeding from a deep gash across his forehead where a rock had hit him, but his breathing and pulse were regular. McCoy glanced over to the spot where Eileen had been standing. Now she was almost entirely buried under the mass of rocks, only one of her hands protruding.

McCoy knew there was no way he could get her out of there on his own. He fumbled for his communicator and finally managed to raise the ship.

"McCoy to Enterprise. Emergency!"

It was Spock who answered. "What happened, Doctor?"

McCoy was oddly breathless, and had to make an effort to get the words out. "Rockslide... Jim and Eileen... hurt. Get a rescue party down here. Eileen's buried under rocks."

"I will see to it immediately. Please stand by, Doctor."

Three minutes later, Spock and the rescue party he was leading materialised. The men started removing the rocks from Eileen's body immediately. Spock helped them with the largest rocks, then went over to McCoy who was kneeling at Kirk's side and trying to stop the bleeding on the Captain's forehead.

"How is he, Doctor?" Spock couldn't entirely hide the anxiety that crept into his voice.



"He took a severe blow on the head, otherwise he seems to be all right. I don't want to risk transporting him up to the ship, though. Will you signal for an aircar, Spock, and inform the local authorities that we'll take him to the nearest hospital."

Spock merely nodded and spoke into his communicator, then went back to help the men with their task.

It took them almost twenty minutes to uncover Eileen's body, and by the time McCoy was kneeling beside her, they could hear the hum of the aircar approaching. Aircars were one of the benefits Druma had gained through its contact with the Federation, and the new aircars were making it possible to reach and settle the remote mountain regions, which up to then had been too far from any road.

Fortunately, there was a ledge large enough for an aircar to land on near the place where the landslide had occurred.

A doctor from the local hospital had accompanied the driver, and now McCoy informed him of the condition of his patients. "The Captain over there is unconscious, but apart from possible concussion, I'm sure he's all right. But the girl - we just dug her out from under that mass of rocks. She's alive - barely. I don't want to risk our transporters. Let's get them into the car and to the hospital as fast as possible."

The Enterprise men lifted the limp forms of their Captain and his girl friend onto foldable stretchers and carried them over to the aircar as quickly as safety would permit. The aircar was of the large transporter type, having a platform in the back instead of seats; it could accommodate the two stretchers easily.

Spock spoke to the driver. "Is your aircar capable of accommodating five persons?"

"Sure, that shouldn't be any problem"

"Then Dr. McCoy will accompany you to the hospital." He turned to McCoy, who was already squeezing himself into the back of the aircar. "I will contact you at the hospital later."

McCoy nodded acknowledgement, then busied himself over his patients as the aircar got ready to take off. When he looked out of the window, he caught the last shimmer of the Enterprise team beaming back aboard.

Seven hours later, McCoy wiped the sweat from his brow as he stood back to look down at Eileen, who was lying in the intensive care unit of the local hospital. Modern equipment had been attached to the rather old-fashioned hospital beds, but there was also a confusing beeping and humming from some of the older instruments which were fulfilling their purpose in spite of their age. Eileen's body was covered almost entirely with bandages.

She had just been wheeled in from the operating theatre where McCoy had worked over her frantically, although he knew instinctively that he was fighting a losing battle. He had done all he could, laser-knitting broken bones, stopping internal haemorrhages, finally cleaning and sealing the external wounds.

He connected a third transfusion bottle to the tube which had

been inserted into a vein in Eileen's arm. He looked again at the monitor panel - another item which had been provided by Starfleet - over her bed.

All the readings on it were very low - except the pain indicator.

The chief surgeon of the hospital, who had assisted McCoy as he operated, had left him a small bottle containing a crystal clear liquid. McCoy had been hesitant about giving Eileen the drug; morphine - for that was what the bottle held - still caused addiction. But none of the synthetic drugs were effective. Although unconscious, Eileen was still in pain.

McCoy recognised the foolishness of his earlier hesitation. With Eileen, the risk of addiction would hardly matter. It was doubtful whether she would even regain consciousness. At least he could make her comfortable.

Under normal circumstances, she might have had a minute chance to recover, but her body was weakened by the disease it had been fighting for too long.

For a moment McCoy had considered having full life support equipment beamed down from the Enterprise, but then decided against it. He had done all his oath demanded.

Of course, there was always the irrational hope that a patient might miraculously recover. McCoy had never given up that belief in miracles, because if he had, Kirk, Spock and a large number of the Enterprise crew would be dead a dozen times over. Yet he would not artificially prolong a life which he knew was bound to be extinguished - painfully - very soon.

He filled a hypo with the morphine, watching the pain indicator as he injected it. The drug was taking effect already.

Leaving the hypo on the small table, he turned and left the room.

Out in the hall, he immediately spotted the silent figure of Spock, who was sitting on one of the benches that lined the corridor. With his hands folded in his lap, Spock was a study in calmness, but McCoy recognised the tenseness of the Vulcan from his rigid posture.

The Vulcan's acute hearing told him that there was somebody coming down the hall. He raised his head, then rose from the bench when he saw that it was McCoy approaching.

"Doctor?"

McCoy sensed all the anxiety behind that one word. "We finally stopped all Eileen's internal bleeding, but she lost a large amount of blood; and in her general condition..."

"I know, Doctor." Quiet sympathy and support. "I am sure you have done all you could." A moment of silence. Then Spock added, "What about the Captain? The doctor on duty would not let me see him."

McCoy had to smile in spite of his tiredness. Spock was haunting the hospital now in the way he haunted sickbay when Kirk was

ill or injured.

"I don't know, Spock. He was still unconscious when I left him. I'm going to look in on him now. Why not come along?"

The Vulcan fell into step beside him. "What was the Captain's condition?"

"Don't worry, Spock, the injuries aren't severe. Jim is going to be as right as rain in a few days."

They met the duty nurse at the door of the private room to which Kirk had been assigned. She recognised McCoy and gave him the report.

"Mr. Kirk regained semiconsciousness about two hours ago, but he was very restless and raving, so Dr. Higgins prescribed five milligrams of valium. He is asleep now."

"Thank you, Nurse," McCoy said. "I'll stay with him for a while. I'll call you if I need anything."

Spock and McCoy entered Kirk's room. The lighting was on night-time status, and McCoy took the chart off Kirk's bed and went over to the lamp, which was positioned beside the sink. Scanning it quickly, he told Spock in a low voice, "Just as I told you. His injuries aren't severe. A few abrasions from the fall he took, and some lacerations where he was hit by rock splinters, but they'll heal quickly enough. The only serious injury is the blow on the head. Jim does have a concussion, and Higgins had to put in seven stitches to close the wound. It was bleeding too badly to be sealed. I can remove the scar later on. Jim might be headachey and dizzy for a day or two, but otherwise he should be fine once he's slept off that stuff they've given him."

McCoy noted that the strain in the Vulcan's face had eased somewhat. It was a moment before he spoke.

"I am glad that the Captain sustained no serious injures. I will be beam-"

"Don't you think it's time we stopped pretending for once? I know you're as worried as hell about Jim and want to be near him. Damn, Jim's my friend, but you are too. Now Higgins made the room next door available for us. It has a connecting door to this room and contains a couch and a cot. So if you don't mind doubling up with me, you are welcome to share it."

Spock hadn't interrupted, but McCoy was aware of the struggle going on inside the Vulcan. It was a moment before Spock said, "Very well, Doctor. I will just call the ship and inform them that I will be spending the night down here." McCoy's ear was trained enough to pick up the note of gratitude in the Vulcan's voice.

The Doctor knew that gratitude was something Spock would probably never be able to express in words, but the silent understanding was enough for both of them.

McCoy got the scanner from his ever-present medical pouch. Passing it over Kirk's body, he said, "He'll sleep till morning. That stuff they've given him is pretty strong."

"It isn't a dangerous drug?" Concern.

"No, just a strong tranquilliser, perfectly safe over a short period. It's been used on Earth for centuries. Come on, Spock - let's turn in. I'm tired as hell. We can leave the connecting door open in case Jim wakes."

They made their way over to the connecting door. In the other room, Spock sat on the cot to make his call to the Enterprise while McCoy rummaged about the room, trying to get settled. He went to wash his face with cold water at the sink and eventually ended up by putting his head completely under the running water. He grabbed a towel and started rub-drying his face and hair. Returning to the couch, he tossed the wet towel onto it carelessly, and sat down. Spock had finished his call to the ship, and was sitting quietly on the edge of the cot, his fingers steepled.

"They've left us a tray with some sandwiches and a thermos with tea, in case you care for some."

The Vulcan permitted himself a small smile. "A snack would be welcome, Doctor."

McCoy got up and pulled the small table into the place between the couch and cot. Filling two plastic cups with the hot, steaming tea, he said, "Here's a sandwich with egg salad. I guess you can eat that, huh?"

The meal was shared in companionable silence. McCoy didn't really feel hungry, and left his sandwich unfinished. Spock did finish his, to McCoy's amazement. The two of them sat silently, sipping their tea.

McCoy placed his empty cup on the table, and looked at Spock. "You want something to help you sleep?"

Spock again gave him one of his rare smiles. "In my case, that won't be necessary. My mind can tell my body to relax whenever necessary. But what about you?"

"I wish I had that ability. But no drugs for me, either. I'll need all my senses in case Jim needs something. Anyway, I'm so tired I guess I won't have any trouble falling asleep." With those words McCoy pulled off his boots and lay back on the couch.

He was indeed asleep in a few minutes, but his sleep remained restless. Spock watched him for a few minutes, then got up and went over to the side of the couch.

McCoy had said, *You are my friend, too.* Here was something he could do for his friend.

He sat carefully on the edge of the couch so as not to waken the Doctor. Then he reached for McCoy's face and gently placed his fingers on the entry points for the meld. He couldn't erase memories and troubles as he had once done for Kirk; with McCoy he would feel the need to ask permission for such a thing. But he could ease McCoy's burdens somewhat.

As he entered the meld, he became aware of a sense of welcome. Not the same feeling of oneness and love as with Kirk, but a warm welcome nevertheless.

He entered the deeper plains of McCoy's mind.

Yes, there it was. It was closely akin to a nightmare. McCoy seemed to blame himself for the things that had happened to Eileen. Spock had suspected something of the sort, but not the intensity. There was a vivid picture in McCoy's mind of himself, bent over a computer readout, searching in vain for a cure for a disease which dozens of other doctors and scientists had found incurable. There was the painful knowledge of how the disease was very slowly destroying vital body tissues.

All that had taken on a nightmarish quality. McCoy wasn't aware of it during his waking hours because his rational mind rejected such thoughts, but this subconscious idea haunted him in dreams.

Spock went about his task of rechannelling some of those guilt feelings so that McCoy would be able to come to terms with them on his own.

The dreams. Yes - something ought to be done about the dreams. Spock searched his mind for something that would give the Doctor peace. He came up with a picture of a sunrise at the edge of Vulcan's Sas-a-Shar Desert; the sun rising in an orange and violet sky with silver birds sailing on a gentle breeze.

That done, Spock continued probing the doctor's mind for more trouble spots. There was the dark area of McCoy's shattered marriage, but that was something best left untouched. He delved deeper, but the feelings he met here were pleasant. There was a little blonde girl - no, a young woman - who was loved deeply by McCoy, his daughter Joanna. There was his adopted daughter Siggi. And there was Jim, a close and trusted friend, for whom McCoy felt very deep concern and affection, and - yes - love.

And there was also Spock himself - a respected colleague and friend. It was a different type of friendship from that with Jim, but the affection and care was there, too. No, there was nothing to set right here. Yet Spock did not withdraw from McCoy's mind immediately, lingering in those feelings of warmth and friendship for a moment longer, and just before he did withdraw, he left McCoy a message.

I care too, Bones.

When McCoy woke in the morning, he found to his own surprise that the sleep had indeed refreshed him.

Spock was still asleep, curled up on the cot. McCoy didn't want to waken him and got up quietly. He went into the adjoining room, and saw that Kirk was showing signs of waking up.

McCoy reached the bedside just as Kirk opened his eyes. He smiled at him.

"Welcome back, Jim."

After a moment, Kirk's eyes focused on McCoy's face. "Bones? What happened?" He looked around him. "This isn't sickbay. Where am I?"

"You were knocked out by a rock yesterday. We brought you to

the local hospital."

"Are we... We're on shore leave?" The question was somewhat alarmed. "Bones, I don't seem to be able to remember what happened!"

McCoy nodded. "Partial amnesia. Nothing to get worried about. That was a pretty bad blow you took to your head. How do you feel, Jim?"

"I've got a headache. Otherwise I don't know. Hungry, I guess."

McCoy produced a hypo from his medikit. "This will take care of the headache, and I'm sure we can do something about your other problem as well." He gave Kirk the shot and pressed the call button on the nightstand. When the drug started to take effect, Kirk pushed back the covers and started to swing his feet to the ground, but McCoy placed a firm hand on his shoulder, holding him back.

"Where are you going, Jim? You have a concussion and should stay in bed for the next few days."

Kirk looked up at him a little sheepishly. "I've got to pee."

"Sorry, Jim, a bottle will have to do. I'll ask the nurse for one."

With a resigned shrug, Kirk settled back against the pillows. There hadn't been any questions about Eileen yet. Probably Jim didn't remember. *For the moment, that might be just as well*, McCoy thought.

At that moment the nurse came into the room. "You rang for me, Doctor?" Seeing that Kirk was awake, she added brightly, "Ah, we're finally awake. How are we feeling this morning?"

Since Kirk was looking at her in bewilderment, McCoy answered. "Yes, I rang for you, Nurse. We are fine this morning, and hungry, and we need a vessel into which to relieve ourselves."

Now it was the nurse's turn to be bewildered, but after a moment she broke into a laugh. "I'll see to it, and I get your message, Doctor. I hope you are feeling better, Mr. Kirk."

Kirk had overcome his surprise at the nurse's strange way of talking, and grinned back at her. "We are feeling as well as could be expected under the present circumstances."

The nurse, glad that Kirk wasn't annoyed, flashed him a smile. "I'll see to 'our' breakfast and the other needs."

"I'd be delighted if you joined me - for breakfast, I mean," Kirk called after her. When she had left the room, Kirk grinned at McCoy. "Nice girl, huh? Do 'we' like her?"

McCoy chuckled. "We had both better watch our step, Jimmy-boy."

The nurse returned some minutes later, wheeling in a cart in front of her. On the top were two bowls, mugs, and a large urn with coffee, and from the lower shelf she produced the 'vessel' McCoy had requested. Placing the porridge bowls on the nightstand, the nurse smiled at Kirk.

"I'm sorry, I can't join you in any of your activities right now, Mr. Kirk. I have work to do." She put the vessel in a drawer of the nightstand, then asked, "You know how to use this?"

Kirk blushed somewhat. "We have similar things in sickbay aboard ship, and I'm sure Dr. McCoy will provide any additional information I need."

The nurse couldn't prevent an amused smile twitching the corners of her mouth. "Push the button on your nightstand if you need anything else."

Kirk smiled back. "I will. Thanks."

When she had put the mugs and urn on the nightstand as well, the nurse turned to go. She had hardly left when Kirk reached for the bowl and spoon. Looking at its contents, he made a face.

"Porridge."

McCoy took his own bowl and grinned. "What did you expect, Jim?"

"I'd settle for a steak, or even some ham and eggs."

"You're on a light diet. Besides, what's wrong with porridge? There's some cream and sugar if you want it."

Kirk poured a large measure of cream onto his porridge and began to eat. Noticing that it did not really taste bad, he was finished with the bowl in less than five minutes.

After breakfast, McCoy left Kirk to get some of his things from the ship. By noon, he had settled comfortably in the small room adjacent to Kirk's. Spock, satisfied that Kirk was recovering, had left to sit in on the diplomatic meeting, as he usually did when he was not needed aboard the Enterprise. They had agreed that McCoy would stay with Kirk until he was discharged from hospital, while Spock rented an apartment to which they would move once Kirk was out of hospital.

McCoy had lunch with Kirk, and left when Kirk dozed off peacefully, for though most of the pallor had left Kirk's face he still needed lots of rest - in spite of his claims to be all right, and ready to be up and about.

McCoy had just adjourned to his room to get a brief rest himself, when he was startled from his nap by a knock on the door. Sitting up, he called a "Come in" towards the door.

It was Dr. Higgins, the head of the hospital. "Sorry to disturb you, Len," he said as he entered. Finding that they were kindred spirits with their dislike for the ultra-modern technology, they had come to call each other by their first names quite easily. "I am afraid I have some bad news for you," he continued. "The girl you brought in yesterday is dead."

There was a moment of silence before McCoy nodded quietly. "I didn't really expect her to make it. I even think she's better off this way, Greg. She was ill with an incurable disease. She didn't suffer, did she, Greg?"

"No."

In fact, Eileen had passed away quietly, not once regaining consciousness. Her body functions had simply ceased. Of course they had tried to pull her back, but her death had been irreversible.

McCoy was surprised at the calm with which he took the news. Some small part of him wanted to take on the responsibility for Eileen's death, but another inner voice was whispering, *It wasn't your fault, Bones*, and McCoy suddenly caught himself thinking of silver birds soaring on a breeze high up in a beautiful orange and violet sky.

Idly wondering where that thought had suddenly come from, he turned his attention back to his colleague, who was looking at him with some concern.

"Are you all right, Len?"

McCoy smiled. "Yes, I'm fine. I've been thinking, I guess."

"Understandable. Do you want to perform the autopsy yourself?"

McCoy hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "If you assist me. But not today. Can you get it scheduled for tomorrow afternoon?"

"Sure. Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm settled in fine. Thanks again for letting me have this room."

After the other doctor had left the room, McCoy lay back to get a bit more sleep.

Having settled Kirk comfortably in his bed with a couple of books, but so that he could look out of the window onto the scene below if he wanted to, McCoy spent the next morning touring the hospital with Dr. Higgins. After lunch, they performed the inevitable autopsy on Eileen.

It showed that the disease had progressed even further than McCoy had suspected, and it would have been only a matter of a few weeks before it reached the final stage where Eileen would have been constantly in pain. She had died from the enormous loss of blood and her weakened resistance.

Deep down, McCoy felt gratitude that the girl, Jim and he himself had been spared experiencing the suffering accompanying the final stage of leukaemia ignota. Somehow he was able to fight down the feeling of guilt which was welling up inside him nevertheless; it always came when he lost one of his patients. For the moment he was grateful for Kirk's partial amnesia, because this meant that he could put off the task of giving the bad news to his friend for a few days.

He felt exhausted, and when he found Kirk fast asleep in his room, he decided he would take a brief nap himself.

When Kirk woke up, he felt refreshed but also terribly bored. He had spent half the afternoon reading, and growing tired of the books McCoy had brought him, pressed the call button on the

nightstand. He felt like starting a little flirtation with one of the nurses, but as he was about to start paying compliments to the pretty girl who came to look after his needs, suddenly felt he couldn't. There was a feeling as if he was being strangled, and a severe headache started pounding in the back of his head.

He stared at the nurse for several long moments, unable to speak. If she was startled by this, she didn't show it; instead she said cheerfully, "Well, what do you need, Mr. Kirk?"

Kirk was at a loss as to what to say for a moment before he pointed to the bottle containing headache pills that McCoy had left him, and said, "I've got a headache. I need something to wash down a couple of those."

The nurse gave him a smile. "I'll see to it right away."

Two minutes later, she returned carrying a carafe with orange juice which she placed on the nightstand. "Anything else?"

Kirk shook his head cautiously. "No, thanks."

When the nurse had left, Kirk downed two of the pills and lay back against the pillows to wait for them to take effect. Slowly, the headache ebbed away, and after about twenty minutes Kirk felt well enough to try and sit up.

He surveyed the room. It was clean, but not very attractive-looking. He wanted to explore his surroundings a bit more, for some of the equipment looked rather antique and not like the standard Starfleet equipment of the hospitals he was used to.

He pushed back the covers and turned to swing his feet down to the floor. For a moment a wave of dizziness swept over him, but it passed after he had remained sitting quietly on the edge of the bed for some minutes. Then he got slowly to his feet and waited until another wave of dizziness had passed before he made his way over to the sink. His legs were a bit shaky but otherwise he began to feel better.

He studied his appearance in the mirror. There were some scrapes on his cheeks, and, of course, the bandage that covered the cut on his forehead. McCoy had forbidden him to take it off, though he had complained about the itch it caused. Kirk ran a hand over the stubble on his chin. He hadn't had a shave in three days and was resolved to do something about it if he could.

He began searching the room for some kind of razor, finally finding one neatly stored away in a leather pouch in the large wall cabinet. It took him a moment to figure out how the electric razor worked, for this one was not equipped with a small power pack of its own but needed to be plugged into a socket. But once this problem was solved, Kirk was able to manage the razor, and he was just running his hand over again smooth chin when McCoy entered the room.

Once McCoy had recovered from the surprise of seeing Kirk standing in front of the mirror, he rushed to his side.

"Didn't I tell you to stay in bed?"

Kirk looked at him sheepishly. "Yes, you did. But... Well, I got all bored and itchy, and I just had to get up."

McCoy took out his scanner and checked Kirk over carefully. "Well, you don't seem any the worse for it. Feeling all right?"

"Yeah."

"Not dizzy or giddy?"

"No." Then, seeing the doubt in his friend's eyes, he added, "Well... I did feel a bit dizzy when I got up, but I'm feeling fine now."

"So much for obeying your kind doctor's orders," McCoy muttered. "But I see you got yourself cleaned up somewhat. Now hop back into that bed of yours."

"Bones..."

"No argument. Don't start overdoing things. You may get up for an hour or so in the evening when Spock's here to keep an eye on you."

Knowing that he would not be able to make his friend change his mind, Kirk gave in with a shrug and climbed back under the covers after McCoy had straightened them out. "Can't you at least take that darned bandage off? It's driving me crazy."

"We'll see about that," McCoy relented. "It needs to be changed anyway. Now hold still. This might hurt a bit."

McCoy began to remove the bandage very gently, but Kirk still winced when McCoy pulled off the last layer of gauze from the wound. Though it was still an ugly red mark on Kirk's forehead, a scab had formed on it, and once McCoy had cleaned it thoroughly, he smiled at Kirk.

"I'll put some spray-sealing on it, but don't you start to peel that off. The wound is healing nicely. I'll be able to take the stitches out in a few days."

"Stitches?"

"Yep. Dr. Higgins had to sew you up 'cause the spray dressing wouldn't stop the bleeding. You don't feel headache any more?"

"No. I did a while ago, though. I don't really know why. I was starting to flirt with that pretty little nurse, and suddenly my head started throbbing. I took two of the pills you left me."

McCoy realised that this headache was turning out to be one of the symptoms that showed when Kirk was trying to remember something about his accident or something related to Eileen. Apart from that, Kirk was recovering very fast.

On the fourth day after the accident, Kirk was discharged from the hospital, and he and McCoy took an aircar to the apartment Spock had rented for the three of them. He remembered some parts of their present mission now, and Spock patiently filled him in on the rest, being careful not to mention Eileen's name or anything connected to her or the accident, because McCoy wanted Kirk to remember as much as possible on his own. Spock had once suggested a mind meld to McCoy, but the Doctor had declined for the time being, since he hoped that Kirk would be regaining his full memory as the head injury healed.

Kirk's wound was healing all right. A week after the accident McCoy took the stitches out. Though it stood out as a red scar on Kirk's forehead, the wound had healed properly. McCoy would remove the scar once they were back aboard the ship. Kirk was also regaining his memory of the things that had happened prior to the accident - except for the memory of Eileen. He got interested in their present mission again and even accompanied Spock to watch one of the diplomatic sessions. When they returned that evening, Kirk was excited and at the same time cursing diplomats and red tape. The debate seemed to drag on endlessly.

"Those debates will take years! I feel like just leaving all those diplomats here and going back to the ship without them," Kirk said when they had settled in the living room of their apartment.

"I doubt it will take that long, Captain. And leaving them would be against Starfleet's orders. The progress report we received last weekend said that it would probably take about three more weeks."

"This was scheduled to take not more than four weeks, and we've been here for three already."

"Two weeks and four days, Captain."

"Well, then, at least we could go back to the ship!" As his health returned, Kirk was beginning to feel restless again. He was fed up with all the rest he was getting.

McCoy had entered the room and overheard Kirk's last words. "Remember, your shore leave turned into sick leave, and it's up to your doctor to say how long that is supposed to last."

"Then let's get our things together and go back to the ship! I'm dying of boredom down here, and I'm really feeling fine, Bones."

"I can't certify you fit for duty yet, Jim."

"Why not?"

"You still suffer from partial amnesia."

"What? I can remember most of the stuff. You said so yourself."

"Most things. But you still can't recount all the details of how your accident came about."

"You and I were in the mountains... in a cabin of some sort... then the landslide..."

"That's not all there was to it."

"If I try to remember too hard, I get all headache again. You know that, Bones."

McCoy nodded, but didn't say anything. By the way Kirk was rubbing his forehead, he could see that another headache was beginning to build up.

"Starting again?" he asked.

Kirk nodded an answer without looking up.

"This has been a pretty long day for you. Why don't you get ready to cuddle up under the covers? I'll be with you in a few minutes to give you something for your headache."

For a moment Kirk looked as if he was going to argue, but then he got up slowly and made his way to his bedroom. After a few minutes McCoy went to 'tuck Jim in' as he called it, but there was a frown on his face when he returned from Kirk's room.

Spock looked at him and, noticing the frown, asked, "Is the Captain all right?"

"He's asleep now, but I had to give him a pretty strong sedative. That headache - did he show any signs of it during the day, Spock?"

"No."

"You didn't push on any of the points concerning his accident or Eileen in your conversation with Jim, did you?"

"Of course not, Doctor. You told me not to."

"Then it's just as I feared - Jim doesn't want to remember."

Spock looked puzzled. "Doctor, I'm afraid I can't quite follow you. The Captain is obviously not well yet. How can you say he - ?"

"Don't get me wrong, Spock, I'm not saying that Jim is consciously refusing to remember. But there is a thing about the Human psyche... The memory of Eileen is a painful one, so Jim's subconscious mind blocks it out. His mind is using the accident as an excuse, so to speak, not to remember Eileen."

"But Jim's headaches...?"

"Another one of Nature's protective mechanisms. The knowledge about Eileen is all there in Jim's subconscious, but if he tries to reach that memory, the headache sets in to prevent him from digging up that particular knowledge. Frankly, I don't quite know how I can break that block."

"I've suggested the mind meld before."

"I had hoped that Jim would remember on his own, but if there's an other way, we'll have to use it. But before we do, I want to try taking Jim back to the cabin. Perhaps that will trigger off the memory."

"With a mind meld, I could make things easier for him to bear."

"You mean erase certain painful memories? That's not the way, Spock. If we have to use the meld, I want you only to break through the block - nothing more."

"Of course, Doctor. I'll do what you think best. Would you care for a game of chess now?"

During the week they had spent together on the planet's surface,

Spock had patiently taught the rules and logic of the game, for McCoy's skills in chess had been barely elementary. Though he still lost, McCoy's skill had improved greatly during the week. So, when they sat down at the chess table that evening, McCoy grinned at the Vulcan.

"I'm going to beat you this time."

And he did.

When Kirk emerged from his bedroom the next morning, he looked much better.

The breakfast table was already set, and Kirk ate with a healthy appetite. When they were finished, Kirk pushed his plate back and stretched. Looking at his friends, he said, "So - what are we going to do today? Going to the diplomatic meeting again, Spock?"

Before Spock could answer, McCoy spoke up. "I had planned a trip to the mountains. There's a nice little cabin where we could spend a day or two."

Kirk looked at Spock. "Will you be coming with us?"

Spock nodded agreement. "Yes, Captain. The solitude of the mountains will be quite restful - for all of us."

The trip to the cabin didn't have the desired effect. Kirk still didn't remember Eileen. When they entered the cabin, for one moment it seemed as if Kirk had recognised it. He had looked around, but then his hand went to his temple, and after a moment of silence, he had looked at McCoy and said, "Nice place."

McCoy had even tried to push him into remembering by asking him if the cabin didn't remind him of something. Kirk's reaction had been predictable; a severe headache. McCoy blamed himself for pressing the point, but he knew it was an attempt he had had to make.

Now Kirk was tucked up in bed again. McCoy had given him a shot and prescribed rest. McCoy and Spock were sitting in front of the fireplace.

After a period of awkward silence, McCoy went to the bedroom he shared with Kirk and returned with a bottle and two glasses. Spock stiffened slightly in his chair, but to McCoy it seemed as if he had jumped.

"The Captain...?"

"Is asleep. Relax, Spock. You're jumpy as hell. I've told Jim to come down and join us for a quiet evening once his headache is better."

He filled the glasses and handed one over to Spock. The Vulcan hesitated, and McCoy said quietly, "Drink it, Spock. You look as if you need it."

"Doctor - I assure you that my body is perfectly able to function without any C2H5OH present in my bloodstream, and therefore there is no - "

"Dammit, do you always have to be Mr. Joe Cool? I'm worried sick about Jim, and yes, you too. Now don't give me that rubbish that you aren't. I know what my eyes tell me! Can't you be Human for once?" He broke off and sat down heavily. "Hell, I'm sorry, Spock. I didn't mean to yell at you like this. If only I could keep my big mouth shut once in a while..."

Spock permitted himself a smile. "I understand, Doctor. I'm sorry I am not able to... to give you the reassurance you need." Silently, he added, *I wish I could help more.*

"I'm the one who is doing the apologising," McCoy said. "Please - forgive me that outburst."

"It was not your first, Doctor. I assure you, I have become quite used to them over the years."

Was McCoy imagining things, or was there a small twitch at the corners of Spock's mouth? Before the Doctor could be sure of what he had seen, the expression vanished, and the Vulcan raised his glass.

"To your health, Doctor."

"To yours - and Jim's as well." McCoy downed his brandy while Spock merely sipped at his. McCoy looked at the Vulcan thoughtfully. The glint in Spock's eyes was still there. And suddenly, McCoy realised how fond he really was of the alien sitting in the opposite chair.

And then the words, *I care too, Bones* flashed through his mind. He didn't know where that thought had come from, and looked at the Vulcan, rather startled.

"Doctor...?"

Realising that he had been staring at Spock with his jaw hanging slightly open, McCoy hurried to speak. "I was just thinking... Spock, you'll have to perform that meld." He was glad to be able to change the subject.

Spock nodded. "I know. Do you think Jim will be able to tolerate a meld in spite of his recent concussion?"

"Well, the concussion wasn't that severe. Under other circumstances, I would probably wait a few more days, but this thing is causing Jim enough problems as it is, and I think the sooner you break that block now the better and easier it will be on Jim. He's going to be troubled enough by it anyway."

"That is one thing I am concerned about, Doctor. Jim is likely to take the blame for Eileen's death onto himself, irrational though that is. I might be able to deal with some of it during the meld if you give me your permission."

"Sure, Spock. Do whatever you think best about that. I know Jim has that tendency you mention."

Like another person I know, Spock thought. Aloud, he said, "I wanted your advice, nevertheless, because you said that any interference with Jim's memories might be harmful."

"I was asking you not to *erase* any of Jim's memories. He will have to come to terms with the situation on his own, but if you can

alleviate the guilt complex, I certainly won't stand in your way; it'll save me a lot of psychotherapy. Besides, you probably know more about Jim's state of mind than I do, anyway. When do you want to attempt the meld?"

"It will be easiest when the Captain is well rested and relaxed, so I think tomorrow morning would be best."

"Do you want me to give Jim some kind of relaxant?"

"I don't think that will be necessary. I'll explain the procedure to him. It shouldn't be any problem since we've shared a meld many times before."

They heard a door opening and closing upstairs. A look of silent understanding passed between them. Tonight, they would just enjoy each other's company and friendship.

Kirk came bouncing down the stairs. Taking in the scene, he grinned.

"Well, you seem to have settled nicely. I've slept longer than I intended to. Not much use going for a walk, is there?"

McCoy smiled at him. "You ought to get some fresh air, and that goes for your Vulcan friend as well. So why don't you guys go for a little walk while I get the dinner ready?"

Spock rose from his chair. "A very good idea, Doctor. Jim?"

Kirk's face was radiant with excitement, and without further thought, he slapped the Vulcan on the back. "C'mon, Spock - let's take a look around."

McCoy grinned. "Don't go too far. Remember that it's getting dark. You don't want to get lost."

"There is no reason for concern, Doctor. I'll be taking my tricorder along, so that I will be able to lock on to your readings and find our way back, and I assure you..."

He had no chance to finish his sentence because both Kirk and McCoy were roaring with laughter. "Get out of here!" McCoy finally managed to gasp.

McCoy looked after them as Spock and Kirk made their way to the door.

Jim was happy.

It would be so easy to leave things as they were, or to ask Spock to erase the troublesome memory from the Captain's mind - but McCoy knew that that wasn't the way, and he felt sure that with the help of Spock and himself Kirk would eventually be able to come to terms with his loss.

Somehow, it was as if Spock was the one stabilising factor in their lives. He was always there when his help was needed, and though McCoy knew that Spock would hardly ever be able to express his friendship openly, he knew it was there. Over the last months, his friendship with the Vulcan had deepened. Spock had tried to help him through the whole affair about Eileen as well as he could.

He could not help Kirk in any way while Eileen was still alive, for although Spock did understand how close Kirk and Eileen were, the complicated maze of a Human male/female relationship was mostly beyond his comprehension, and the thought of it alone held something embarrassing for him. He had seen Kirk go through many loves, most of them superficial, a few more serious. He was aware that the latter usually had a tragic ending.

Kirk had told McCoy about Spock's invitation to accompany him to Vulcan after Edith Keeler's death, but Spock did not really know how to deal with his friend after he had lost his love.

With a shudder, McCoy thought back to the evening in sickbay when Kirk had come very close to a breakdown. That had been shortly after McCoy had informed him about Eileen's condition. Kirk had complained about a severe headache, but after a shot and half a bottle of Saurian brandy, he had told McCoy that Eileen had suggested that they should enter a marriage contract soon.

McCoy hadn't told Spock about it, but the Vulcan seemed to sense McCoy's mood of despair yet again and had stood quietly by his side. Maybe the Vulcan was not able to comprehend the Human definition of love to the fullest extent, as he had always claimed, but he certainly knew what loneliness meant, and sometimes McCoy wondered if he would have been able to bear the burden if Spock had not stood by him with moral support and quiet friendship.

McCoy had just finished setting the dinner table when Kirk and Spock returned from their excursion. Kirk was covered with mud, and laughing, and from the look of Spock's pants he had had his share of whatever kind of fun they had had.

"Dinner ready?" Kirk asked. "I'm starving."

"Captain, I think we should get ourselves cleaned up first," Spock remarked quietly.

"What happened?" McCoy wanted to know.

"There's a creek a few hundred yards from here. Looks like the ideal place for fishing. And there are also some willow-like trees..."

"One of which the Captain wanted to survey more closely, and therefore decided to mount, which turned out to be a rather difficult task, and - "

"Say it, Spock. I tried to climb the tree but fell off and into the creek. Spock pulled me out."

McCoy shook his head, and Kirk was still chuckling while they ascended the stairs to their bedrooms to shower and change.

It turned out to be a quiet evening.

After dinner, the three of them settled in front of the fireplace, Kirk deciding to sit on the rug, leaning against Spock's chair. The conversation was flowing easily, and after a while Spock left them for a moment to go up to his bedroom. When he returned, he was carrying his Vulcan lyrette and a bottle of the exquisite light wine Kirk had come to appreciate very much over the years. But McCoy was surprised when Spock came back to them with three wine glasses he had found after rummaging through the cabinets.

"I thought Vulcans didn't indulge in alcoholic beverages, Spock?"

"As you will recall, Doctor, alcohol does not affect us in any way, but I believe you will find the flavour of this wine quite pleasing. It's alcoholic content is so low that it should not have any harmful effects on Humans either, unless drunk in very large quantities."

McCoy still looked rather sceptical. Kirk grinned up at him.

"Our Vulcan friend has made a rather long speech. But believe me, Bones, I've often shared a glass of that stuff with Spock, and I don't think it has done me any harm."

McCoy smiled, and accepted the glass Spock had poured for him. He was indeed surprised by the quality of the wine. It was of a pale green colour and had a fruity flavour to it that made McCoy hand his glass back to Spock with a request for a refill once he had finished it. He had not thought the ascetic Vulcans capable of producing such a delightful beverage.

The evening wore on in companionable silence. Spock had begun to play his lyrette, and when McCoy began to feel a little light-headed after his fourth glass of wine, he leaned back in his chair and started to enjoy the music. The tunes Spock played were beautiful and strangely soothing.

Jim looks totally relaxed, McCoy thought as he watched through half-closed eyes. More so than any sedative would ever have accomplished. He would be able to sleep easily that night, which would be an immense help with the meld in the morning.

A shudder went through McCoy as he thought of what the morning would bring. But the music wouldn't permit such thoughts to linger in his mind.

Jim is going to be all right, McCoy thought dreamily as he allowed himself to have caught by the music and seemed to float on it.

He must have dozed off, for when he opened his eyes a while later, Spock wasn't playing any more, but sat in his chair watching him quietly over steepled fingers. He started to speak, but something in Spock's expression hushed him. There was a trace of a smile on the Vulcan's lips, and when he looked at Kirk, he saw the reason for it. The Captain was still leaning against Spock's chair, but his head had dropped forward and he was fast asleep with a smile on his face.

"Is that what you wanted to accomplish with your wine and music?" McCoy asked in a low voice.

Spock nodded, not completely masking his feelings as he usually did. "Jim needs to be relaxed, and you must admit, Doctor, that some of our Vulcan practices are effective."

McCoy noted the teasing note in the Vulcan's voice. Spock, too, was at ease, and McCoy didn't want to destroy that atmosphere by needling Spock as he usually did, so he merely said, "I can't deny that." Then he glanced at his watch. "My God, Spock, it's past midnight! You don't intend spending the whole night in that chair?"

The problem was solved by itself before Spock could answer, since McCoy had unintentionally raised his voice. Kirk woke up.

He looked at his friends somewhat sheepishly. "I must have dozed off. Sorry."

"Same happened to me, Jim. No reason to get embarrassed, I think. Spock's own fault if he plays us lullabies." McCoy noticed Spock's raised eyebrow, and, not sure if the Vulcan realised that he was being teased, added, "Just kidding, Spock. The music was beautiful."

Kirk looked from one to the other. "Well, what do we do now? What time is it, anyway?"

"Sleepy-time, Jim. It's well past midnight."

"That late." Kirk glanced out of the window. "Look, the moon. It's so much like Earth. What about going for a nice long walk out in the moonlight? Or sitting at the side of the creek and watching silver ripples on the water?"

McCoy remembered that not too long ago Kirk had done just that with Eileen, but he kept his tongue carefully in check. "You seem to be in rather a romantic mood tonight, Jim. But for me, it's time to turn in, and I advise you to do the same. There'll be other nights with moonlight, and fitter company." He grinned at Kirk and got up from his chair.

Kirk had turned towards the Vulcan. "Spock?"

"No, Jim. I am tired too. And for once I agree with Dr. McCoy. It has been a long day for you, too, and you ought to get a good night's sleep. There is much ahead of us tomorrow, too."

Kirk got up too and looked at his friend curiously. "What's ahead of us?"

Spock had been busily getting his things together. He did not like doing it, but for once he would have to evade his Captain's questions. "It's not important, Captain."

"You were making it sound pretty important. Come on, Spock, I want to know what you are up to."

"Jim, please - I am tired. I will explain tomorrow."

Kirk looked a little hurt, but then he smiled. "Promise?"

"Promised. Good night, Jim."

When Kirk got up from the floor, he swayed slightly.

Spock was already going upstairs to the bedrooms, and Kirk obviously intended to go after him. McCoy stopped him by placing a hand on his shoulder. He had noticed a second empty wine bottle.

"How much of this stuff did you have, Jim?" he asked, indicating the bottles.

"Huh? Oh, the wine. Don't remember. Spock kept refilling my glass. It's good, though, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but I guess I'll have a word about it with Spock tomorrow. He told me something about not drinking it in large quantities."

"Bones, you're usually the last one to worry about how much you drink when you're not on duty. We're on leave, and besides, nobody is drunk. Spock's never drunk... you know that." He began to sound fuzzy.

"Sure, I know. Now be a good boy, Jim, and go up to our room. I'll just do the dishes, then I'll come on up, too. I want you to be in bed when I'm done here, all right?"

"Bones..."

McCoy had to smile. Kirk had had at least one glass too many. Yet he couldn't have had much more of the wine than McCoy himself. Maybe his still weakened condition was responsible for his lowered tolerance level. No - Spock wasn't to blame.

The problem was how to get Jim to bed because he obviously didn't want to turn in just yet. "Up you go, Jim, or I'll tuck you in personally. I'm sure you wouldn't like that."

Kirk gave in with a shrug. McCoy anticipated further arguments with his adventurous Captain, but he found him fast asleep when he entered the bedroom they shared. Kirk was still wearing the Vulcan robe he had changed into after his encounter with the tree, and lay curled up on the bunk. Obviously, he had just pulled off his sandals and then fallen asleep as he was.

McCoy went for a blanket to cover his friend. When he returned, Kirk had turned his face towards McCoy and a smile played about his lips. McCoy spread the blanket over the sleeping form of his friend and then gently brushed the unruly lock of hair out of Kirk's face. Somehow he felt that things were going to be all right. Spock was a friend they could trust.

McCoy felt calmer than he had for days as he went over to his own bed and settled down to sleep. In time Kirk would be able to cope with his loss, for with Spock and himself at his side he would not be lonely. *Our friendship has pulled us through a lot of tough situations, and it will do so again,* McCoy thought as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Kirk woke rested and feeling good the next morning, except for a slight hangover. He took a shower and then donned one of the light Vulcan robes Spock had given him. They were very comfortable to wear around the house.

The table was already set for breakfast when Kirk came down the stairs. Spock and McCoy were obviously waiting for him.

"Why didn't anyone wake me?"

"We retired rather late last night and thought it wise to let you sleep as long as you needed, Captain."

Kirk took his seat at the table and reached for the coffee pot, but shook his head when McCoy offered him a plate with ham and eggs. McCoy looked at him with concern.

"What is it, Jim? Aren't you feeling well?"

"Hangover, Bones. I guess I drank too much of your wine last night, Spock. And I think I talked some rubbish. I'm sorry."

"I should be the one to apologise, Captain. I should have known that your accident might have lowered your tolerance towards alcohol, and should have warned you not to drink too much. Please accept my apologies."

"Come on, Spock - this is nothing some of Bones' pills won't set right in a few minutes."

"Drugs won't be necessary. If you will permit, Jim." Spock placed his fingers in the familiar position for the meld. It was just a feather-light mind touch, but Kirk felt the headache beginning to fade away. He smiled at the Vulcan.

"Thanks, Spock."

After breakfast, Spock steepled his fingers in front of him and looked at Kirk. "Jim, I need your permission to enter into a deep meld with you. McCoy and I agree that it is the only way to help you conquer the amnesia concerning your accident."

"Sure, Spock. This is getting pretty annoying to me, so let's get the meld over with as fast as possible."

"Very well. I suggest we retire to your room where you can lie down." He glanced at the Doctor. "I don't know exactly how long this will take..."

"Understood, Spock. I won't disturb you for... say the next two hours."

Spock nodded agreement, and he and Kirk went up the stairs to the Human's bedroom.

When Spock had closed the door behind them, he indicated the bed. "You had better lie down, Jim. This is going to be a very deep meld, and... Jim, it won't be entirely pleasing for you. Your mind is holding a painful memory from you, and I will hurt you when I uncover it during the meld."

"You'd never hurt me, Spock." Kirk gave the Vulcan a reassuring glance as he lay back on his bunk.

"No, Jim - I won't hurt you, but the memory will. But you have to remember everything connected with the accident... and what happened before."

"Don't worry, Spock. I'll live." Kirk patted the bunk beside him. "Let's get on with it."

Spock sat down beside Kirk and his fingers easily found the points on Kirk's face necessary to initiate the contact. Spock met no resistance here, only warm welcome. He dived deeper and deeper into Kirk's mind, relishing as Kirk did the feeling of oneness.

Then suddenly he came upon an impenetrable wall.

This was the block he had been searching for. He tried pushing through it, but met resistance. Spock withdrew somewhat to 'speak'

with Kirk through the meld.

Jim, I've found the block in your mind. Please don't push against me.

I'm not resisting, Spock.

I will have to force a way through. Jim, relax as much as you can.

Spock began again to push against the block with all his might. It took a tremendous mental effort to break through the barrier, for Kirk's mind was almost as strong as Spock's, and this time the subconscious part of it kept fighting Spock; but finally the barrier did break, and Spock was engulfed in a turmoil of emotions and pain. It seemed that he heard Kirk cry.

For a moment Spock's only desire was to ease his friend's pain, but then he remembered his promise to McCoy not to interfere with Kirk's memories. He withdrew somewhat again.

You remember now what happened, Jim. I'm sorry that I hurt you.

Silence, then... Eileen... I should have taken the rocks...

Jim, listen. What happened is not your fault. You know Eileen was dying.

He got no response. Diving deeper again, Spock began to ease the feelings of guilt. The feelings of loss and grief remained immense. After a moment of hesitation, Spock began to initiate the first stages of healing there, too, by rearranging some of the thoughts and letting Kirk see some of the logic, too. McCoy couldn't blame him for that! He made Kirk understand that Eileen had been spared a much more painful death.

The Vulcan was about to withdraw when he remembered something else that might help. Hadn't McCoy said often enough that Jim was married to his ship? So Spock combined the memories of Eileen with the ship, the happy time they had spent aboard the ship Kirk loved. Spock hoped that this would indeed help Kirk. Only time would show.

He made Kirk's mind drift off to sleep before he finally withdrew.

When McCoy looked in on Kirk and Spock about two hours later, the Human was still asleep while the Vulcan was kneeling in a corner, his fingers steepled and obviously in meditation. But he opened his eyes as McCoy entered the room.

McCoy went over to Kirk. He ran his scanner over him as Spock said, "He is only asleep, Doctor."

McCoy turned towards the Vulcan. "How did it go, Spock? Did Jim remember?"

"I was able to break the mental block, and Jim will remember everything as it happened." Spock hesitated. "Doctor, Human grief is something I am not completely familiar with. The Captain will need our help."

"Spock, I think your friendship - our friendship - will help Jim if he needs - and wants - our help."



Presently, Kirk began to stir. McCoy was at his side again immediately. Kirk's eyes were puffy and his pillow still wet with tears shed during the meld. He drew in a shuddering breath but kept his eyes closed as if afraid to face reality.

When he did open his eyes, McCoy's hand rested on his shoulder. "Jim, I hate to ask you this question but do you remember what happened?"

Kirk merely nodded. "I do."

"Is there anything I can do for you, Jim?"

"Just leave me alone."

McCoy was hurt by the harsh words, but he hid his emotions quickly. "Sure, Jim. I'll be downstairs if you need me."

Kirk kept to himself during the days that followed, only speaking to his companions when absolutely necessary. On the second evening McCoy asked him if he wanted to go back to the city, because he thought that maybe the cabin reminded Kirk too much of Eileen. But Kirk shook his head.

"No. It's very quiet out here. The brook and the willows... Sorry, Bones. I need time to think."

It had been the first time in two days that Kirk had used McCoy's nickname again. The Doctor felt somewhat relieved. The atmosphere became more relaxed, but Kirk spent most of his time down by the brook.

When his behaviour had not altered after about a week, it was Spock who raised the question again as he sat in front of the fireplace with the doctor. Kirk had retired to bed early, and there was concern in the Vulcan's voice as he looked at McCoy over steepled fingers.

"We received notice from Starfleet Command today that we are to leave Druma in a fortnight, whether or not the talks have been completed by that time."

"Well, then they finally realised that they can't have a Starship sitting in orbit around a planet for ages just to wait for a bunch of bureaucrats to make up their minds one way or another! It's about time somebody realised that!"

"That is not my point, Doctor. I am concerned about the Captain's condition. Will he be fit to assume command at that time?"

"Jim could assume command of the Enterprise this minute, Spock. He's A-1 again physically. I just wish he would get a bit of exercise. He's spending too much time brooding."

"That is my concern, Doctor."

"Don't get me wrong, Spock. I don't think this grief would affect Jim's ability to command. It's just... Well, he's spending too much time trying to analyse his own feelings... hurting himself with it. But that's part of Jim's nature, Spock."

Spock was definitely not at ease. He shifted in his chair uncomfortably, trying in vain to mask his anxiety. "What can we..."



What can be done to help him, Doctor?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. Jim needs something to take his mind off his own grief. He needs something to take care of, worry about. Perhaps getting back to the ship would be the best thing - but I want Jim to get a bit more rest; yet he doesn't seem to be getting much down here. Damn, I don't know. It's just a vicious circle."

Spock sat silent, obviously lost in thought. Then he got up, and feeling McCoy's eyes upon him, said, "Excuse me, Doctor, I will retire for the night."

McCoy looked bewildered. "What are you up to, Spock?"

"As I said; I am tired and want to rest, Doctor," Spock replied mechanically. "I am not 'up to' anything else."

McCoy sensed that the Vulcan was trying to hide something from him, but he only said, "I see. Goodnight, Spock."

Spock was even more withdrawn the next day, and McCoy, who already missed the easy banter with Kirk deeply, became acutely aware just how much he had relied on the Vulcan's easing his loneliness over the last few weeks.

Kirk left early in the morning for a long hike, as he put it, and Spock radioed for an aircar to go to the city. McCoy busied himself around the house, but the day seemed to be dragging on endlessly.

Spock returned in time for dinner in an aircar he had rented, but Kirk came back very late that evening. McCoy got worried when Kirk had not arrived back when the sun began to set behind the mountains, and stood at the door looking out for his friend. Suddenly he felt a light touch on his arm. Turning, he found the Vulcan standing behind him.

"I am sure the Captain is all right, Doctor. He took a knapsack with provisions, and he is experienced in mountaineering."

The Vulcan returned to his chair next the fireplace silently, and after a moment McCoy followed him, trying to make conversation.

"Will you tell me what you did in town today, Spock? Went to that darned diplomatic meeting again?"

"I did attend part of it, Doctor. I also intended to do some shopping... but I didn't find what I wanted."

McCoy stared at the Vulcan in silence. Spock and shopping? This was certainly something new. Well, he had already seen a few new sides to the Vulcan over the past months.

This shopping business didn't appear to be anything Spock wanted to talk about, so McCoy remained silent and just filed away this new piece of information.

A very groggy Kirk returned two hours later. McCoy, mediscanner in hand, hurried to his side as soon as Kirk had set foot over the



doorstep.

"You O.K., Jim? You look terrible! Where the hell did you go? We were worried sick about you! Why didn't you at least tell us where you meant to go?" He broke off his tirade when Kirk leaned heavily against the wall, and placing an arm around him, led him towards a chair.

Spock had risen too. He started towards Kirk, but the Human smiled at him weakly. "I'm all right, Spock - just awfully tired."

Spock nodded, and returned to his chair while Kirk faced McCoy. "I'm sorry you were worried, Bones," he said quietly. "This was something I had to do on my own. I followed the brook to its source as... as we set out to do that day... Eileen was hit by those rocks. You would have tried to stop me. I just had to do it..." Kirk broke off, unable to put his inner turmoil into words.

"I understand, Jim. I'll get you something to eat. You must be starving."

Kirk shook his head. "No, thanks. Just a shower and my bed."

"Jim, you're sure you don't want to talk...?"

Again Kirk dismissed him with a shake of his head. Instead, he got up and started to go upstairs. Then, sensing McCoy's hurt, he turned.

"I still have a lot of thinking to do, Bones - on my own... but I appreciate your offer. Sleep well, both of you."

Spock had risen again. "Jim...?"

"Spock, I'm O.K. I'm going to bed. You don't want to read me my bedtime story, do you, Spock?" Without waiting to see if Spock would give him an answer, he disappeared into his bedroom.

McCoy turned when he heard Spock murmuring under his breath. "Spock? What did you say?" Was Spock actually talking to himself, or was he speaking to me? McCoy wondered.

"I said I would do it if it helped at all."

"Do what? Oh, I see - the bedtime story." He looked at the Vulcan. There was a trace of a mischievous glint in his eye. "Are you pulling my leg now, Spock?"

"Why should I attempt such a thing, Doctor?" It was only a trace of their usual arguments, but McCoy chuckled, and the atmosphere in the room lightened.

"Believe me, Spock, I would do anything, too, if Jim would let me help him, but he's as pigheaded about it as ever. Well, I guess that's a good sign."

Spock nodded and then started towards the stairs, too. "I will leave for the town early in the morning, so please excuse me - I..." There was a moment of hesitation, then Spock smiled briefly. "Goodnight, Bones."

"I'll turn in too, Spock." Surprised to find the Vulcan waiting for him, he hurried to join him. They climbed up the stairs

together, in silence.

McCoy had to swallow the lump in his throat that had formed when he heard Spock using his nickname. He thought of the pangs of jealousy he had felt over the last few days when Spock had seemed entirely absorbed in his worry about Kirk's peace of mind. No, Spock had been worrying about him, too. It was mutual.

I care too, Bones, came the echo into his mind. McCoy smiled briefly. Would the Vulcan ever be able to say those words? He wasn't aware that Spock had already said them, even though not out loud, but suddenly it didn't seem to matter any longer. Both men knew instinctively that the friendship was there, and that was enough.

Spock stopped, and McCoy realised that they had reached the door of Spock's bedroom. The Vulcan was looking at him with mild curiosity.

"Doctor?"

McCoy grinned at him. "Don't worry, I'm not about to join you." He saw Spock's eyebrow rise, and chuckled softly. "Night, Spock."

Before the Vulcan had a chance to reply, he made for his own bedroom and closed the door behind him.

When McCoy woke the next morning, Spock had already left, but Kirk was still fast asleep, and McCoy decided to let him sleep on. It was mid-morning when Kirk finally came down to the living room. McCoy smiled at him.

"Well, finally awake, huh? I'll get you some breakfast."

"I'm not hungry, Bones," Kirk croaked with a hoarse voice.

McCoy became instantly alarmed, and it was then that he noticed the paleness of Kirk's face. He led Kirk to a chair by the window, and, placing a hand on Kirk's hot forehead, shook his head.

"You're running a fever, Jim. You stay right there while I get my stuff to look you over."

He returned with his medical pouch a moment later. Running the scanner over Kirk, he asked, "How do you feel, Jim? Any pains or aches somewhere in particular?"

Clearing his throat, Kirk answered. "It's just a sore throat, but I feel lousy."

McCoy had finished the scan and looked at Kirk, somewhat relieved. "It's just a cold you're coming down with. I'll give you a vitamin shot and something for your throat, but I want you to stay in bed today, nevertheless."

McCoy had half expected to have Kirk mad at him and protesting, but he got no objection. He helped Kirk back to the bedroom. He saw that Kirk was settled against the pillows comfortably before he said, "You don't have to eat if you don't want to, but you need plenty of liquid. Want some orange juice, Jim?"

Kirk nodded. He drank thirstily from the glass McCoy gave him. The Doctor was slightly worried. Usually Kirk was one of the worst patients when not seriously ill, but now he submitted to McCoy's treatment quietly, not even protesting against being given the shots. Kirk was either feeling really unwell or he was still too preoccupied about his grief; McCoy suspected it was the latter.

"I can have us beamed back aboard the Enterprise, Jim, if you want me to. I think you would be more comfortable in sickbay."

"No, Bones, that won't be necessary. I'm fine here. Besides... the air is good." The throat tablets seemed to be helping already, for Kirk's voice had cleared noticeably.

McCoy shrugged. "All right, we'll stay. But make sure you get plenty of rest - say, have you been climbing trees and managing to fall in the creek again?"

Kirk shook his head. "No."

"Well, you obviously managed to get wet somehow. The legs of your pants were still damp when you came home last night."

Kirk blushed slightly. "I didn't fall into the creek. When I reached the source of the brook, I was pretty tired and I thought it would be refreshing to bathe my feet in the water - there's a pool where a spring comes out from under a rock. Well, that's what I did, but as I sat there I must have lost track of time completely. I guess I had my feet hanging in the water for a pretty long time." He looked at McCoy sheepishly. "My pants got wet without my noticing it. You know... I was thinking."

At that moment McCoy almost wished that Kirk couldn't remember what had happened, but he was sure that Kirk would come out of the reminiscing mood eventually. In a way, it was almost funny; for the last few days McCoy had felt rather useless as Kirk was shutting him out from his grief, and Spock seemed to be rather preoccupied too. Now he had Kirk's cold to look after, but didn't relish the idea too much.

He reached for the hypo again. "I'll give you something to get your temperature down. It will work faster if you get some sleep."

Again Kirk tendered his arm without any protest, but he winced slightly as McCoy pressed the hypo home. "That hurt, Bones."

"Well, take it as a good sign, Jim. If you start complaining to your kind doctor again, he'll know you're feeling better."

Kirk sank back against the pillows and McCoy pulled the covers up to his chin. "Get some sleep, Jim. You'll feel much better when you wake up, and I promise you'll just get aspirin should any further medication be necessary."

Kirk smiled at him and then obediently turned onto his side to go to sleep as the Doctor had ordered.

McCoy spent most of the day sitting in front of the cold fireplace. Kirk's illness was not serious, so it was silly that he should worry, but he was not used to Kirk enduring such an ailment as an ordinary cold quietly. McCoy would have felt better if he had had

Kirk complaining and arguing with him. He hoped that Kirk would soon snap out of that mood.

He was brought out of his reverie by the sound of the door closing, and he realised that it was already getting dark outside. Spock made his way over to him.

McCoy smiled at him wearily. "Have you been shopping again, Spock?"

"Indeed I have, Doctor. Where is the Captain?"

"He's upstairs - in bed with a cold."

A frown had begun to form on Spock's usually expressionless face. "Don't worry, Spock. He's all right. In fact, he could be up now if he wanted. I looked in on him a while ago. His temperature is down. I told him he could get up, but he pretended to be too absorbed in a book; though I don't think he could have read it the way he was holding it - upside down. I guess he's in one of his moods."

"Is the Captain able to receive visitors?"

"Certainly, Spock. I'll be glad if you can cheer him up."

Suddenly, there was a strange noise from the large basket Spock was carrying. McCoy stared at the Vulcan in surprise. "What have you got in there, Spock?" he asked, indicating the basket.

The Vulcan blushed slightly. "Something I hope Jim... The Captain... will like."

There was the muffled sound again, and McCoy grew impatient. "Come on, Spock, let me see what you've got inside that basket."

After another moment of hesitation, the Vulcan was about to speak, but McCoy, suddenly having a bright idea, interrupted him. "No, you don't have to tell me, Spock. It's a bunch of tribbles, right? But you know Jim can't stand the sight of a tribble, and considering - " He was cut short by a deep growl coming from the basket, a definitely untribblish sound.

McCoy paled visibly. "I guess you'd better calm down whatever you've got in there before your good family doctor gets a nervous breakdown."

"I am sorry, Doctor. I did not intend to frighten you. If you will permit..." He opened the lid of the basket, and at once a large black head emerged from the opening, now uttering small whimpering noises of canine delight and enthusiastically trying to reach Spock's hand with his eagerly slobbering tongue. Spock set the basket on the floor and petted the dog's head rather awkwardly.

Placing his paws on the rim of the basket, the dog pushed himself out of it. His tail wagging eagerly, he made his way over to the astonished Doctor, whose jaw was working frantically, but as yet he was not able to voice his surprise. When he finally found that his vocal cords obeyed him once more, he uttered one word which contained a series of questions.

"Spock???"

The Vulcan looked somewhat embarrassed. "His name is Tibor. I saw him at the market today and I thought Jim might like him..."

"Crazy as he is, he'll love him, but I never thought you would... Never mind." He looked down at the dog, which had taken an interest in McCoy's boots and pants, the seams of which he was chewing eagerly. Realising what was happening, McCoy bent to remove his pants from Tibor's mouth.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Tibor let go of the pants immediately, starting to lick the Doctor's face with such fervour that he knocked McCoy over in the process. McCoy tried to fight him off, and called to the Vulcan.

"Get this bundle of... affection off my back before he eats me alive!"

Spock had to grab the dog by the neck, and lift him physically off the Doctor. McCoy climbed groggily to his feet.

"My God, he can kill you with that weight of his!"

"I was assured that he is not dangerous. I apologise for his behaviour. Tibor is young, and lacks the necessary discipline."

"What do you mean, 'young'? He's not fully grown yet? Gosh, yes - he's all paws. What breed of dog is he? Some kind of Druman mammoth canine?"

"No, Doctor. The man I bought him from assured me that he is an Earth import. He is a cross between a Newfoundland dog and a St. Bernard, both of which are known for their faithfulness and affection." He hesitated. "Do you think he is not suitable for Jim?"

"Hell, no." McCoy, who had regained his breath somewhat, grinned. "It's just... Well, it's an unusual present, especially coming from you. It struck me as being a bit... illogical."

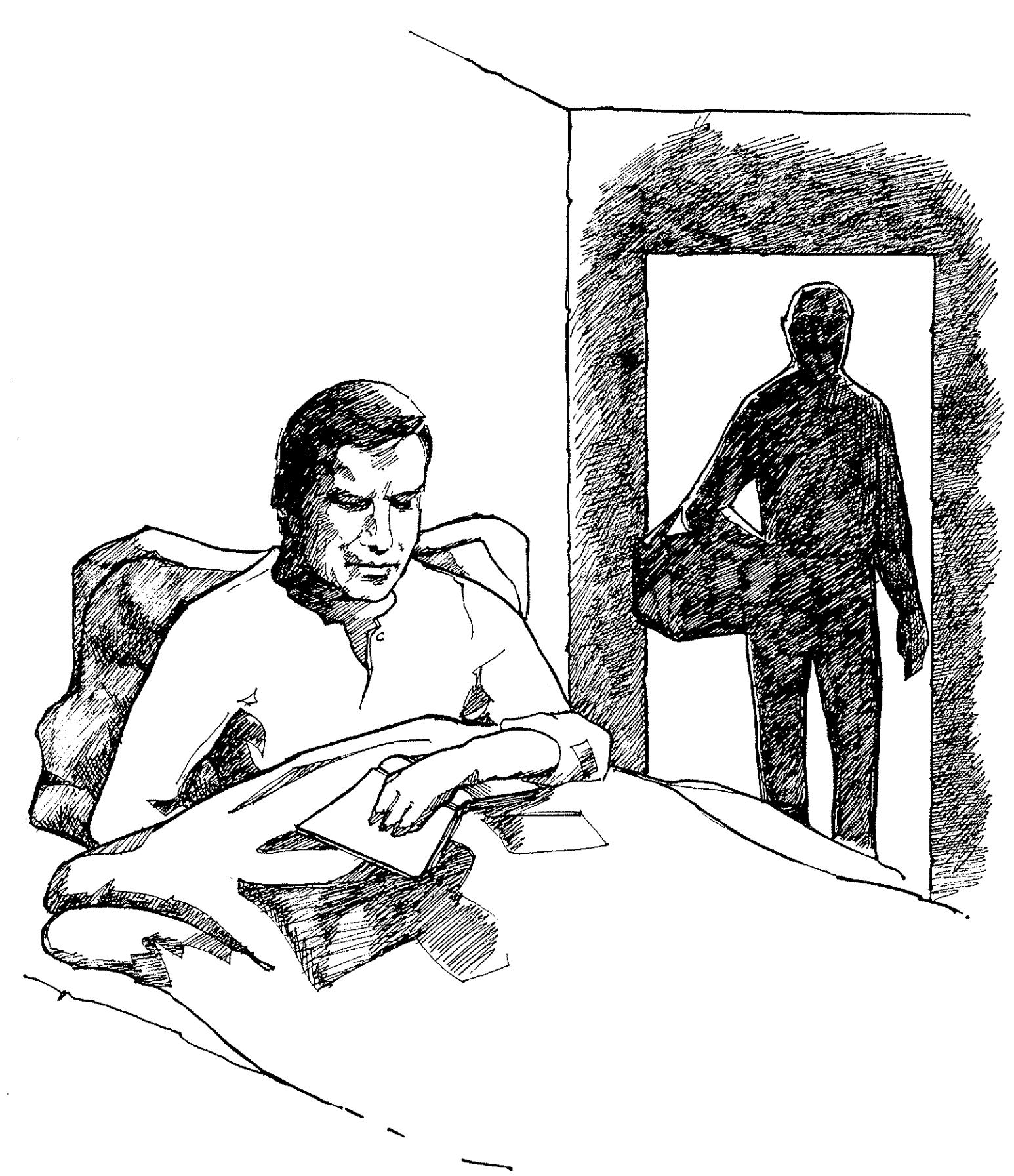
"Illogical, Doctor? I assure you my decision was arrived at through a logical reasoning process. You yourself said that the Captain needed something to take care of, therefore - "

"Yeah, I see. My fault. But - gee, I think Jim will love him."

Tibor was struggling to free himself from the grip of the Vulcan. McCoy, not too keen about the possibility of another tongue wash, smiled. "Look, why don't you put him back in the basket and take your surprise packet directly up to Jim? If nothing else, it will divert his mind from his brooding for a while."

Spock obliged, getting Tibor back into the container after a considerable struggle, for the dog had obviously set his mind to exploring his surroundings. That task finished, Spock ascended the stairs to Kirk's bedroom with McCoy trailing behind. But the Doctor was at his side again when they approached the door.

Upon opening it, they found the room in semi-darkness as dusk was descending rapidly, and Kirk had not turned on his bedside lamp. McCoy's first thought was that maybe Kirk was asleep, but his acute senses soon told him that that was not the case.



"Jim?"

His question into the darkness remained unanswered but a quickening of the breathing of the room's occupant told him that he had been heard. With a shrug he turned on the light.

Kirk was still in the same position as when McCoy had last been up, with the book lying upside down on his lap.

"Now don't tell me you've been reading again. Even your eyes aren't that good."

Kirk smiled at him sheepishly. "No, I've been... daydreaming."

"Darkdreaming would be a more appropriate term," McCoy snorted. "Anyway, I have a visitor for you."

Spock had remained standing in the doorway. When Kirk turned his head and saw the Vulcan, his face brightened a little. "Spock. I'm sorry - "

"Jim, are you all right? McCoy told me you were ill..." His voice trailed off.

"Sure, Spock. I've got a cold, that's all. I've been a good boy and stayed in bed all day. Honest, I feel much better already."

There was a subdued bark from the basket. With one swift movement, Kirk swung his legs out of bed to sit on the side of it. He looked at his Vulcan friend in puzzlement.

"What was that, Spock?"

Spock came as close to grinning as he ever would. "Something I thought you might like, Captain." With that, he opened the basket.

This time, Tibor managed to get out of the basket with a single leap. Kirk had risen in surprise. For a moment he stood speechless, then he got down to his knees and opened his arms for the dog, which came romping forward to meet him.

For the next ten minutes, Kirk and his new-found friend were a tangle of arms, legs and paws upon the floor. Finally, when both were sufficiently out of breath, Kirk managed to pin his opponent to the floor and sit up.

"Spock, I don't know how to thank you. He's a beauty. Where did you get him?"

"I got him in the local market. He's from Earth, though. His name is Tibor. Let me help you, Captain." With a smile, Spock helped the Captain to his feet. Kirk let out his breath and sat down on the edge of the bed.

McCoy rushed to his side, mediscanner in hand. "Jim, you O.K.?"

Kirk nodded. "Just out of breath. Quit worrying, both of you. Come on, Spock, don't spoil Tibby's fun!"

Spock released his hold on the dog's neck, and Tibor leaped happily up onto Kirk's bed. "You should not over-exert yourself, Captain," he reprimanded mildly.

"Don't worry, Spock, I won't. But I'm starving. Bones, can we get something to eat?"

"We? I don't know if I can find any puppy biscuits for you, but I'll dig up something." Grumbling happily, he left the room, and after a moment, Spock, Kirk and Tibor followed suit.

Kirk's mood did improve during the days that followed. Occasionally he slipped back into the mood of despair, but whenever he started brooding, his black 'shadow' was at his side, and Kirk could not resist him for long.

McCoy had to admit that Spock's plan worked well indeed. Often Kirk, the Vulcan and the dog would set out for long hikes in the morning. McCoy for once did not feel left out, because he sensed that Kirk would open up in the quiet company of his Vulcan friend more easily than with the more extrovert Human.

On the last evening before their scheduled return to the ship, the three friends were sharing a quiet evening in front of the fire. Spock had produced another bottle of his Vulcan wine, and when they were all settled comfortably in the chairs and on the rug in front of the fireplace - for Kirk had decided to join Tibor on the floor and was now sitting in his favourite position at the foot of Spock's chair - Spock began to tell McCoy about the plans Kirk and he had made. They wanted to spend their next assigned shore leave on Vulcan, as they hoped that the peace of that planet would help to erase the last traces of Kirk's grief and guilt.

McCoy nodded approvingly after hearing that announcement. "Not that I like the blasted heat of that planet of yours, Spock, but from the few things I've seen on my short visits there, I have come to appreciate the peaceful atmosphere it offers. I'm sure the stay there will do Jim heaps of good."

"You are welcome to join us on our leave for a more thorough introduction to Vulcan culture, Doctor."

For a moment, McCoy just stared at him in surprise, then he said, "You must be joking, Spock. What would make you..." He broke off and looked at the Vulcan helplessly.

"No, Doctor, I assure you I am completely serious. You will find the atmosphere pleasing, too, I assure you. For your time with us, you will become a member of the Family. Jim has shared this experience before, and assured me that you will like it. Of course, you are free to decline..."

There was a long moment's silence, for McCoy was unable to speak. Finally he swallowed hard and said, "I'll be glad to come if you will have me." Then, to lighten the atmosphere, he added, "But the next shore leave is at least three months off, and what will you do with him?" He indicated Tibor, who was busily chewing the fringes of the rug.

"That's another reason why we'll go to Vulcan," Kirk said. "Spock suggested that Amanda would be glad to look after him. In fact, he already sent her a spacegram about it, and she agreed readily."

McCoy raised a questioning eyebrow. "But I understand that she

already has a sehlat to take care of."

"My mother assured me that she would be glad to have another Earth creature around the house. My father has been rather busy at the Vulcan Science Academy lately, and my mother seems to feel lonely. She also said that Sawbones would like someone to play with."

"Sawbones?"

"Yes." Kirk chuckled. "That sehlat we told you about is named after you - so to speak. Spock agreed that it was a fit name for it, didn't you, Spock?"

McCoy did not wait for Spock's answer. "You pointed-eared rascal, how..." he began his tirade, which was to last for several minutes.

Spock merely raised an eyebrow at McCoy's torrent. When the flood of words finally ceased and McCoy leaned back in his chair, exhausted, he said, "Your flood of illogic has been very enlightening - as usual, Doctor. You and the sehlat do indeed have some qualities in common."

Before McCoy had a chance to reply, Kirk rose and put up a hand.

"Gentlemen, it has been a long day. Let's call it a day; we'll have to get up early tomorrow." As McCoy and Spock rose too, he added softly,

"We'll be going home."